Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Seasonal allergies: is it a cold or allergies?

You're coughing and sneezing, have a runny nose are congested and feel totally exhausted. Although the signs seem obvious, you may **not** have a common cold and could instead be suffering from allergies. Unfortunately, it can be pretty hard to tell the difference—even for the professionals. Colds and allergies share many of the same pesky symptoms but their causes and treatments are different. The tips below will help you identify whether you're battling a short-term cold or a long lasting allergy and determine what remedy will work best for you.



Which is which?

A cold is a virus that enters your body and causes your immune system to fight back giving you those classic symptoms like congestion and sore throat. On the other hand, allergies happen when your body mistakes harmless substances—like mould or ragweed—for germs and your immune system responds by creating cold-like symptoms.

How are they different?

Despite sharing so many signs there are ways to tell the difference between the two. Fever, aches and pains, thick or coloured mucous and a cough are telltale signs of a cold and can usually rule out allergies. However, if you're asthmatic, you may battle a dry cough with your seasonal allergies. Although watery eyes can accompany both concerns, itchy eyes raise a red flag for allergies—you may also experience an itchy nose and throat.

The duration of your symptoms will also help you tell the difference. Colds come on slowly and usually last one or two weeks whereas allergies can come out of nowhere and hold on for months. Similarly, if you feel like you're always sick or colds seem to hit you every year at the same time you may actually be suffering from allergies.

What can I do?

Luckily you can't do any harm treating your own symptoms if you mistake a cold for an allergy or vice versa. Over-the-counter-remedies like antihistamines and decongestants used to treat both conditions are pretty similar. You just need to know what's causing your symptoms so you can alleviate your specific problem. Just be wary of natural immune boosters like Echinacea if you're not sure what you're dealing with. Although some studies suggest it may help in battling a cold, it should not be taken if you have allergies. By over-stimulating your immune system, it can actually worsen allergy symptoms.

If you think you may have allergies or aren't entirely sure, you should contact your doctor. He or she can help you figure out what's ailing you, prescribe preventative medication or refer you to an allergist if your symptoms are particularly uncomfortable. Also, by pinpointing your allergies you can potentially avoid triggers and figure out the best way to manage your symptoms.

Although not a serious health hazard, cold and allergies can make you feel pretty miserable. Knowing the difference between the two will help you determine whether you need to take time off work, steer clear of others and get lots of rest or if the solution is as simple as an over-the-counter allergy medicine.

Assessing your symptoms and knowing what you’re suffering from will help you breathe easier and get back on your feet as quickly as possible.

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