

At this time of year many people develop upper respiratory symptoms. It is important to distinguish between the common cold, influenza infection, and allergic rhinitis to be able to treat appropriately and understand what the duration of symptoms and possible complications will be.

The flu and the common cold are both respiratory illnesses but they are caused by different viruses. They are both spread from person to person through coughing or sneezing. Sometimes people may become infected by touching something with flu or cold virus on it, then touching their mouth or nose. In general, the flu is worse than the common cold, and symptoms such as fever, body aches, extreme tiredness, and dry cough are more common and intense. Other symptoms of flu include sore throat, headache, and stomach problems such as nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Colds are usually milder than the flu. People with colds are more likely to have a runny or stuffy nose. Colds generally do not result in serious complications such as pneumonia or hospitalization.

Allergic Rhinitis is a collection of symptoms which occur when you breathe in something you are allergic to, such as dust, dander, or pollen. Symptoms that occur shortly after you come in contact with the substance you are allergic to may include: itchy nose, mouth, eyes, throat, or skin, runny nose, sneezing, and tearing eyes. Symptoms that may develop later include stuffy nose, cough, sore throat, dark circles under the eyes, and headache. Symptoms may vary according to time of day or season, exposure to pets or other allergens. Hot, dry, windy days tend to worsen symptoms due to increased amounts of pollen in the air. Most symptoms will be alleviated by treatment with an oral anti-histamine. Skin or blood testing can aid in the diagnosis.

Sources: Medline Plus and CDC