Priority Care BOSTON

Patient Education Handout

Is It a Cold, the Flu, COVID-19, or Allergies?

Symptoms of these common conditions often overlap. This guide highlights typical differences to help you understand what you may be experiencing. Symptoms alone cannot always distinguish between them — testing is often the most reliable way to confirm COVID-19 or influenza.

Symptom / Feature	Common Cold	Flu (Influenza)	COVID-19	Allergies
Onset	Gradual (over 1–2 days)	Sudden (within hours)	Variable (often gradual)	Sudden with allergen exposure
Fever	Rare / mild	Common, often high (100–102°F+)	Sometimes	Never
Body aches	Mild or rare	Common, often severe	Common	Never
Fatigue / tiredness	Mild	Common, often severe	Common	Sometimes
Cough	Common (often productive)	Common, can be severe	Common (often dry)	Sometimes (dry)
Sore throat	Common	Common	Common	Sometimes
Runny or stuffy nose	Common (thicker mucus)	Sometimes	Common	Common (usually clear mucus)
Sneezing	Common	Sometimes	Sometimes	Common / frequent
Headache	Sometimes / uncommon	Common	Common	Sometimes
Loss of taste or smell	Rare (from congestion)	Rare	Sometimes	Rare (from congestion)
Itchy eyes, nose, or throat	Rare	Rare	Rare	Common
Shortness of breath	Rare	Sometimes	Sometimes	Rare (unless allergic asthma)
Typical duration	7–10 days	5–7 days (fatigue may linger)	Variable (days to weeks)	While exposed to allergen

Key Points to Remember

• **Allergies** do not cause fever or significant body aches. Itchy, watery eyes and frequent sneezing with clear nasal drainage are more suggestive of allergies.

• **Flu** often hits suddenly with high fever, severe body aches, and profound fatigue. Antiviral treatment works best when started early.

• **COVID-19** symptoms can range from mild cold-like symptoms to more severe illness. Loss of taste or smell can occur but is not always present. Testing is recommended if you have symptoms or known exposure.

• **Common colds** are usually milder and self-limited. They are caused by more than 200 different viruses (most often rhinoviruses). Symptoms develop gradually and typically resolve within 7–10 days. There is no vaccine for the common cold because of the large number of viruses involved.

Test Early for Flu and COVID-19

If you have respiratory symptoms, consider testing yourself at home for both influenza and COVID-19 as soon as symptoms begin (combination antigen tests are available). Knowing the result helps guide treatment: antiviral medications can shorten illness and reduce complications if started early—ideally within 48 hours for flu and within 5 days for COVID-19. Contact your healthcare provider promptly with positive results, especially if you are older, pregnant, immunocompromised, or have chronic conditions. A negative test does not always rule out infection; retest or seek care if symptoms persist or worsen.

Supportive Measures While You Recover

Saline sinus rinse: Using a saline (saltwater) nasal rinse or neti pot several times a day can help clear mucus, reduce congestion, and may modestly shorten the duration of cold symptoms. Always use distilled, sterile, or previously boiled water.

Zinc: Zinc lozenges (started within 24 hours of cold symptoms) may modestly shorten the duration of the common cold in some people. Evidence for benefit in COVID-19 is limited. Do not exceed recommended doses and avoid long-term high-dose use.

Vitamin C: Regular vitamin C intake may slightly reduce the duration or severity of colds for some people, but taking extra vitamin C after symptoms start has little proven benefit. Getting vitamin C from food (fruits and vegetables) is preferred over high-dose supplements.

Lifestyle foundations (most important): Prioritize sleep, eat nutritious meals, stay lightly active if you feel up to it (gentle walking), maintain social connection (even by phone or video), avoid alcohol and other substances, and use stress-management techniques such as deep breathing or short rest periods. These support recovery more reliably than supplements alone.

When to Seek Medical Care

Contact your healthcare provider or seek urgent care if you experience: difficulty breathing or shortness of breath, persistent chest pain or pressure, confusion, inability to stay awake, bluish lips or face, or symptoms that are severe or worsening. People at higher risk (older adults, those with chronic conditions, pregnant individuals, or immunocompromised) should contact their provider early if they develop respiratory symptoms.

Prevention Tips

• Get the annual influenza vaccine. Consider the potential benefits of the COVID-19 vaccine and discuss options with your healthcare provider.
• Wash hands frequently and avoid close contact with people who are sick.
• For allergies: identify and minimize exposure to triggers; consider over-the-counter antihistamines or nasal steroid sprays as appropriate.
• Stay home when ill to avoid spreading respiratory viruses to others.