

'Tis the season for cold and flu.

As the temperatures get cooler and the holiday season approaches, 'tis the season for cold and flu. This time of year is usually when we start seeing people getting sick with runny noses, cough, and congestion.

“As the temperature drops, more people are staying inside and when one person is sick, it can quickly spread to others,” says Dr. Taylor, M.D. of Newman Memorial Hospital.

Both the cold and the flu are viral infections of the respiratory tract, which includes the nose, throat, airways, and lungs. Symptoms of the two can be similar, but there are some differences. Cold symptoms usually come on gradually and can include a sore throat, cough, congestion, and a runny nose. A cold can last for a week or longer especially in children, the elderly, and those in poor health.

Influenza symptoms usually come on suddenly and can include a fever greater 100 degrees Fahrenheit, chills, body and muscle aches, headache, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, and extreme tiredness. Sometimes you might even have some nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Influenza illness can last anywhere from one to two weeks or longer.

To confirm a diagnosis of flu, your doctor will swab your nose for the virus. Generally flu can be treated with rest, fluids, and over-the-counter medication targeting the symptoms. In some cases, antiviral medications are given to lessen the severity of illness. These antiviral medications are most effective if started within two days of symptom onset. Please be aware that antibiotics are not effective against the flu virus. If you suspect you have the flu, you can be tested in your physician's office or through an Urgent Care Clinic.

Dr. Taylor, M.D. strongly suggests that everyone get a flu vaccination. Influenza vaccination can help with prevention or shorten duration of the flu. “If you have not already received the flu vaccination, the sooner the better,” Dr. Taylor, M.D. “It is never too late to get a flu vaccination.

It is important to remember that it takes up to two weeks after receiving the flu vaccine before your body can protect against the flu. By getting a flu vaccine for yourself and your entire family every season, you can help prevent flu-related illnesses, missed school, work, and even more serious flu-related complications.

Dr. Taylor, M.D. also emphasizes practicing good hand hygiene. It's the simplest and most effective way to help prevent the spread of germs. In addition, he suggests being mindful of some ways that we pass germs that you might not have thought of before:

- Beware of the holiday party! Germy hands are reaching into bags and bowls of chips and watch out for that guest or family member who “double dips” in the dip! If you are able, provide scoops for chips and similar edibles and make sure there are spoons for each person to put their own dip on their plate! If it’s not your party, you may be better off skipping those types of treats!
- Carry a ziplock bag with Clorox wipes or other sanitizing wipes when you are out in public or shopping. Wipe down those shopping cart handles!
- It’s always a good idea to have an alcohol-based hand sanitizer available in your purse, car, backpack and/or pocket. Use it after shaking hands, pushing elevator buttons, using the ATM, pumping gas, using the credit card keypad at stores, etc.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend the following steps for hand hygiene (with soap and water):

- Wash your hands with running water and soap.
- Rub your hands together for at least 20 seconds.
- Pay special attention to your wrists, the backs of your hands, between your fingers, and under your fingernails.
- Leave the water running while you dry your hands thoroughly on a paper towel.
- Use the paper towel as a barrier between the faucet and your clean hands when you turn off the water.

Failing to wash and dry your hands correctly can create a damp breeding ground for germs. Don’t forget to shift rings and watches in order to get your skin dry after washing. If soap and water are not available, use alcohol-based hand sanitizers by saturating your hands with the product and rubbing your hands together until dry.