Cold, Flu, or Allergy?

Is it a cold, the flu, or allergies? It may be hard to tell them apart as they share so many symptoms. Understanding the differences will help you choose the best treatment.

Colds and flu are caused by different viruses. “The symptoms associated with the flu are more severe,” says National Institutes of Health’s Dr. Teresa Hauguel. The flu may cause high fever which lasts for 3–4 days, along with a headache, fatigue, and general aches and pain. These symptoms are less common when you have a cold.

To treat colds or flu, get plenty of rest, and drink lots of fluids. If you have the flu, pain relievers can reduce fever or aches. Allergies can be treated with antihistamines or decongestants.

“Allergies are a little different, because they aren’t caused by a virus,” Hauguel explains. “Instead, it’s your body’s immune system reacting to a trigger, or allergen, which is something you’re allergic to.”

“Allergies can also cause itchy, watery eyes, which you don’t normally have with a cold or flu,” Hauguel adds.

Be careful to avoid “drug overlap” when taking medicines that list two or more active ingredients on the label.

Check with a healthcare provider if symptoms last beyond ten days or if symptoms aren’t relieved by over-the-counter medicines.