



Nose plugged up and coughing?

That may not be a cold, it could be allergies

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Ah, spring. With warmer temperatures approaching, most of us are thinking happily of spending more time outdoors amidst the trees and flowers.

For others, however, the season also beckons massive amounts of sniffing, sneezing and general misery in the form of seasonal allergic rhinitis or hay fever that may be mistaken for a cold.

The big difference

Colds and allergies have different mucus and duration

Seasonal allergy sufferers usually start to notice their symptoms once the weather warms up and trees and flowers start to bloom. Typical symptoms run the gamut from watery eyes to sneezing and congestion.

However, since allergy season is right on the tail end of the winter cold season, it can be hard to tell if your runny nose is due to allergies or just a common cold virus. And if you don't know what's causing your symptoms, how do you know whether to hit the drugstore for antihistamines, see your doctor for allergy testing, or try the time-tested cold remedy of chicken soup and extra sleep?

According to Dr. William Baker, MD, a pulmonologist at the Indiana University School of Medicine, the symptoms of colds and seasonal allergies are somewhat similar, with complaints that include: a runny, stuffed-up nose, post-nasal drip, watery or itchy eyes, sneezing, and wheezing. However, there are some crucial differences.

Baker says the best way to tell the difference between the two is to look at duration of the symptoms and the color of the post-nasal mucus. "Generally a cold will run its course in a few days or a week," he explains, "while allergy symptoms can last for weeks or longer, and often have distinct triggers like pollen, or indoor and outdoor mold.

"And usually, someone with a cold will have yellow or green mucus, while those with allergies have a clearer, thinner post-nasal drip. Also, it is much more common for people with allergies to have itchiness in the nasal area, eyes and nose, and they are much more likely to mention sneezing fits or sneezing numerous times in a row."

Dr. Kimbra Bell at Northwestern Hospital adds that, "with a cold, one tends to also feel fatigued, may have decreased appetite and/or muscle aches, and these symptoms are usually not seen with allergies." A fever and swollen glands also are not indicative of allergies and may mean that a cold or flu is on the horizon.

Seasonal allergic rhinitis is not contagious but may be hereditary, and is caused by a variety of environmental factors. Among them are: grass, tree or weed pollen, mold, flowers, and spores. (Animal danders, hair and dust mites can cause year-round allergies, or perennial allergic rhinitis).

For allergy sufferers who like to know what they're getting into when prepping to spend the day outside, www.weather.com has a "Pollen Cast" tool that gauges the pollen count in any ZIP code, showing current levels of tree, grass or weed pollen, along with outdoor mold.

If the symptoms end up being a common cold, Bell advises there is little else to do but the standard remedies -- "rest, fluids and over-the-counter medications such as Tylenol or ibuprofen for fever or muscle aches."

Allergy sufferers have a few more options, such as the popular drugs Claritin (an antihistamine) and Flonase, (an intra-nasal steroid that helps people with nasal allergies). Since allergy symptoms are a result of a histamine release, which causes the runny nose and itchy eyes, Dr. Bell also recommends the non-sedating medications, "Allegra and Zyrtec -- which are antihistamines -- that help to alleviate these symptoms."

Some of these treatments (such as Claritin) are over-the-counter and can ease pain and irritation immediately, but if symptoms don't clear up after using an over-the-counter method, Baker recommends seeing a doctor for a specific diagnosis. "If the symptoms are not running their course or being cleared up with over-the-counter methods, it could mean that sinusitis is involved, and that could lead to ear infections," he warns.

A physician may try several methods to obtain a conclusive diagnosis. They may examine the nasal passage to see if there is swelling or a pale color in the mucus membrane, which would indicate allergies. The doctor might also check the eyes and throat for signs of irritation, and if necessary, conduct skin or blood tests to pinpoint the patient's allergies.

"Whether it is an infection or allergy," Baker notes, "if the person feels like they aren't getting better on their own, these symptoms can become a tremendous problem that has a big impact on their quality of life and we can do a lot for them. If they try an over-the-counter product and are still feeling bad, they should definitely see their doctor as soon as possible."

The good news is that once a patient knows what they're dealing with and how to treat their symptoms, they can get out there and grab the good weather by the reins!

Cold or allergy?

Symptom Cold Allergy

Duration 3 to 7 days Several weeks or more, or as long as the allergen is present

Color of Post-Nasal Drip Yellow or Green Clear

Fever, temperature, aches present Yes No

Red, itchy eyes No Yes

Sneezing Yes Yes, usually in fits

Natural allergy remedies

Doctors who specialize in natural medicine often advise that while antihistamines can help symptoms on a surface level, allergy patients would do well to make some lifestyle changes or take preventative measures.

* **Honey:** Try taking 1 to 2 teaspoons of locally made honey daily, starting about a month before your allergy symptoms usually kick in. Many naturopaths and herbalists swear by this "old wives tale" because of the theory that locally made honey would contain local pollens to assist the body in developing a tolerance and immunity to those pollens.

* **Homeopathic nasal mists:** These inexpensive saline and salt water sprays help drain pollen away from the nose, and lessen symptoms and discomfort.

* **Fennel:** Seeds, leaves, roots of the fennel plant. Dr. Andrew Weil, author of "Natural Health, Natural Medicine" has reported great improvement with his own allergic symptoms after starting to use this herb.

* **Quercetin:** Bioflavonoid from citrus fruits and buckwheat. This is an herbal supplement that has been shown to reduce inflammation, sinus pain and congestion.



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