The common cold and the flu are both respiratory illnesses and both are caused by viruses. If you have a bad cold and a mild flu, the symptoms may even feel similar. However, they are very different diseases. The difference is important because it can affect what you can do to prevent the disease, as well as what you should be aware of if you are infected. Here are a few differences:

* The flu virus spreads more rapidly in cold, damp air
* There is a vaccination for the flu, but not for the common cold
* The flu usually has more intense symptoms than a cold, with potentially serious complications
* While a cold is usually less worrisome than the flu, colds can lead to bacterial infections
* The symptoms of a cold can develop gradually, while flu symptoms usually hit fast and are severe

**Comparing symptoms:**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Symptom** | **Cold** | **Flu** |
| Fever | Rare | High (100°-102° F) (37° – 39° C); can last 3-4 days |
| Headache | Rare | Intense |
| General Aches, Pains | Mild | Very common; often severe |
| Fatigue, Weakness | Mild | Intense; can last up to 2-3 weeks |
| Extreme Exhaustion | Never | Very common; starts early |
| Stuffy Nose | Common | Sometimes |
| Sneezing | Very common | Sometimes |
| Sore Throat | Common | Common |
| Cough | Mild to moderate | Common; can become severe |

*Source: American Lung Association: "Cold and Flu Guidelines: Influenza"*

The next time you experience a cold or a flu remember that these are caused by viruses and so taking antibiotics which target conditions caused by bacteria may not help with your cold or flu.1 Studies suggest the cold or flu has to run its course while you get plenty of physical and emotional rest.2 There are also many over-the counter medications that can help relieve your symptoms.2 As with any illness, however, if symptoms persist or worsen it is best to go see your health care provider to determine what’s making you sick and what you can do to feel better.