



Health & Wellness

Colds vs. Allergies: Knowing the Difference



Whether you think you have a cold or allergies, they are both a bother.

Review these common questions and answers by the experts and see if you can diagnose yourself.

Question:

I seem to get a cold every spring and fall. I'm wondering if these "colds" are really seasonal allergies. How can I tell?

Answer from James M. Steckelberg, M.D.:

If you tend to get "colds" that develop suddenly and occur at the same time every year, it's possible that you actually have seasonal allergies. Although colds and seasonal allergies may share some of the same symptoms, they are actually very different.

Common colds are caused by viruses, while seasonal allergies are immune system responses triggered by exposure to an allergen. Treatment of a common cold may include rest, pain

relievers and over-the-counter cold remedies, such as decongestants. Treatment of seasonal allergies may include over-the-counter or prescription antihistamines, nasal sprays and decongestants, and avoidance of exposure to allergens where possible.

Question:

My ears have been plugged for more than a week. What causes this? Is there a remedy for plugged ears?

Answer from Laura J. Orvidas, M.D.:

Plugged ears are usually a mild, temporary problem—most commonly due to allergies or a cold. Oftentimes, no treatment is needed. However, if symptoms are severe or last for an extended period, you may want to have the problem evaluated by a doctor.

With plugged ears, your eustachian tubes—the pathways between your middle ears and the back of your nose—become obstructed. As a result, your eardrums can't vibrate normally, so sounds are muffled and you may also have ear pain. You can try to forcibly open your eustachian tubes by taking a deep breath and trying to blow out while pinching your nostrils closed and closing your mouth. If you feel a popping noise, you know you have succeeded.

Plugged ears typically last from a few hours to several weeks—depending on the cause—and usually go away without treatment. When treatment is needed, doctors focus on getting air to flow into the eustachian tubes.

Symptom Checker: Is it a Cold or Allergy?

Symptom	Cold	Allergy
Cough	Usually	Sometimes
General Aches & Pains	Sometimes	Never
Fatigue	Sometimes	Sometimes
Itchy Eyes	Rarely	Usually
Sneezing	Usually	Usually
Sore Throat	Usually	Sometimes
Runny Nose	Usually	Usually
Stuffy Nose	Usually	Usually
Fever	Rarely	Never

Options for clearing plugged ears include:

- Oral decongestants
- Nasal spray antihistamines
- Topical nasal steroids
- Ventilation tubes, in severe cases, to drain fluid and relieve pressure

If your symptoms are severe and last longer than a few weeks, consider seeking care from an otolaryngologist, also known as an ear, nose and throat doctor.

Question:

Is it OK to exercise if I am sick but don't have a fever?

Answer from

Edward R. Laskowski, M.D.:

Mild to moderate physical activity is usually OK if you have a cold but don't have a fever. Exercise may even help you feel better by temporarily relieving nasal congestion.

As a rule of thumb for exercise and illness:

- Proceed with your workout if your signs and symptoms are "above the neck"—such as runny nose, nasal congestion, sneezing or sore throat. Be prepared to reduce the intensity of your workout if needed, however.
- Postpone your workout if your signs and symptoms are "below the neck"—such as chest congestion, hacking cough or upset stomach. Likewise, don't exercise if you have a fever, fatigue or widespread muscle aches.

If you choose to exercise when you're sick, listen to your body. If your signs and symptoms get worse with physical activity, stop and rest. Resume your workout routine gradually as you begin to feel better.

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