A Tickle That Doesn't Make You Laugh

As cold and flu season approaches, how do you know if that throat tickle or cough is a cold, the flu or COVID-19?

Cold versus flu

The flu and the common cold are respiratory ailments that are caused by different viruses. Because both have similar symptoms, it can be difficult to tell them apart. Generally, the flu is worse than the common cold, with more intense symptoms.

Tests done within the first few days of illness can tell if a person has the flu. The symptoms of flu can include fever, chills, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, muscle or body aches, headaches, and fatigue. These same symptoms can indicate a cold but are usually less severe. Adults have an average of two or three colds per year, and most people recover within seven to 10 days.

These healthy habits can help prevent getting a cold or the flu:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing.
- Wash your hands.

Also, everyone 6 months of age or older should get a flu vaccine, with rare exceptions. A flu shot can reduce flu illnesses, doctor visits and missed work. The flu vaccine has also been shown to be lifesaving in children.

If you do get the flu, antiviral drugs can help. These are prescription medicines that are not available over the counter. Antivirals can make the illness milder and shorten the time you are sick.

COVID-19

There are many common symptoms of COVID-19:

- Fever
- Congestion
- Runny nose
- Headache
- Sore throat
- Cough
- Shortness of breath
- Fatigue
- Loss of appetite
- Loss of sense of smell or taste
- Diarrhea
- Nausea
- Vomiting

It can take two days to two weeks for symptoms to appear after exposure to the virus. And some people never show symptoms. If you think you may have COVID-19, take an at-home test or contact your doctor about testing. If positive, talk to your doctor. Most people who get COVID-19 will be able to recover at home.

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, there are several things you can do to prevent the spread of COVID-19:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue. Then throw away the tissue.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a face mask or cloth face covering when you are outside your home.

*The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is an independent organization that offers health information you may find helpful.