

Is it Allergies or a Cold?

In the Pacific Northwest, a great summer has led to a long allergy season. This gives us a chance to make sure we're prepared, [says Dr. Mark La Shell](#) from the [Allergy and Asthma Department at Kaiser Permanente Washington](#). Use our [seasonal allergies action plan](#) as a quick, easy cheat-sheet for allergy season prep.

Cold and allergy symptoms often overlap, so it's easy to mistake cold symptoms for allergies, and vice versa. Understanding the cause of your symptoms helps you choose the right treatment. It also gives you a better picture of your overall health.

Clinicians use the five factors below to help distinguish between colds and allergies.

1. When did you begin to feel unwell? If you remember being around someone who had an upper respiratory infection a few days before you started feeling ill, you may have caught a viral infection. Viruses are spread by contact with sneezes, coughs, and contaminated surfaces such as door handles. Allergies, on the other hand, can begin immediately after coming in contact with triggers such as pollen. If you think you might be experiencing a seasonal allergy, [check the pollen count in your area](#); if levels are high, allergies may be the culprit.
2. What are your symptoms? Both allergies and colds may cause a runny or stuffy nose, sneezing, a cough, and fatigue. Itchy eyes, post-nasal drip, and dark circles under your eyes are more common with allergies. Symptoms more commonly caused by a virus include sore throat, cloudy or discolored nasal discharge, fever, and general aches and pains.
3. How long have you been affected? A cold usually lasts 3 to 14 days. Allergy symptoms can last for weeks or months—as long as you're exposed to the allergen you're reacting to.
4. Are you treating multiple symptoms? For a cold, get extra rest and drink plenty of fluids, including water, tea, or soup with lots of broth. For allergies, it can help to shower and change your clothes often because allergens cling to skin, hair, and clothing. For both colds and allergies, over-the-counter antihistamines, decongestants, and pain relievers may help you feel better, although they won't make a cold go away any faster. And no matter what ails you, avoid medications that treat multiple symptoms, especially if you don't have some of the symptoms the medication is meant to treat. If home treatments aren't working and you still don't feel well, connect with our [Consulting Nurse Service](#) or visit a CareClinic by Kaiser Permanente at Bartell Drugs.
5. How can I prevent colds and allergies?

To avoid catching a virus and spreading colds:

- Wash your hands frequently or use hand sanitizer.
- Cover your coughs and sneezes.
- Keep your hands away from your eyes, nose, and mouth, which are the areas of your body most vulnerable to germs.

To avoid seasonal allergies:

- Try to limit your contact with the allergens you react to.
- If your allergies bother you a lot, immunotherapy (such as allergy shots) may help reduce or even completely prevent irritating symptoms.

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