Q&A

Having a summer cold vs. a sinus infection

By Sabina Sharmeen

FOR THE INQUIRER

Q. How can I tell the difference between a summer cold and a sinus infection?

A. No one likes to feel run-down and sick — especially in the summer. While most people associate colds with cold weather, warm and sunny days do not lessen the risk of catching a cold or developing a sinus infection.

A runny nose, sneezing, coughing and congestion are symptoms of both summer colds and sinus infections. While the symptoms may be similar, there are several differences between the two conditions that can help you determine which one you have.

The main difference depends on how long the condition lingers.

If you have a summer cold, you may feel rundown and experience a sore throat, cough, stuffy nose, sneezing, and a headache. A common summer cold will typically run its course within 10 days.

Early on, a sinus infection may be mistaken for a cold. If you are experiencing a sinus infection, your nasal passages become infected, and your symptoms will likely include pressure behind your eyes and cheeks, fever, and a runny or stuffy nose. Sinus infections can last longer than 10 days, though different treatments can help limit the duration. Another key distinction between the two is the color of your nasal discharge. Summer colds normally produce clear mucus, while a sinus infection can yield a green or yellow mucus.

For a summer cold, over-the-counter antihistamines, such as Benadryl or Claritin, can help with symptoms such as a runny nose, sneezing and watery eyes. But, you should take antihistamines at night before bed, as drowsiness and sedation are common side effects of these medications. If you have a stuffy nose, you can opt to take a decongestant, such as Sudafed.

Most people with sinus infections can get better without antibiotics and OTC medications. Treatments can include taking decongestants, such as Afrin, and pain relievers, such as Tylenol and Advil, to help with the pressure built up in your nasal cavities. However, do not use decongestant nasal sprays for longer than three to five days, as it could lead to chronic inflammation of the nasal cavity. You also can use a saline nasal spray to help aid in the drainage of your sinus or use a neti pot to rinse debris or mucus from your nasal cavity.

Summer colds and sinus infections may not seem serious, but if left untreated, they can both progress and lead to long-term health complications. If your symptoms are severe or last longer than 14 days, contact your doctor.

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