

Cold or Allergy?

Knowing the difference can speed treatment

You're feeling a little rundown. You're sneezing and have a stuffy nose. Must be a cold. Or is it an allergy?

Following a tough spring allergy season - along with a wetter than normal summer, fall allergies are already having an impact in the Midwest.

Now, with the end of summer and the start of cooler temperatures, colds are also regularly being reported.

But how do you know which of the two you have?

Dr. Martine Schultheis, a family physician for OSF HealthCare Medical Group, admits the similarities can be confusing, however there are distinctions.

"Cold symptoms would be more like a runny nose, feeling achy, sometimes having a fever and it can last about a week, or so - and it's a gradual onset as we go," says family physician, Dr. Martine Schultheis, of OSF HealthCare Medical Group. She adds, "You can also have mucus that's kind of thick and yellowish and a little purulent. But allergy symptoms are different," says Schultheis, "in the way that you don't have as much fever as you would with a cold and you don't have this achy, body ache sensation. The liquidy fluid is more like a runny and thin and clear and not so much green, yellowish, pussy discharge from the nose - and the other symptom is the itchy, watery eyes."

Also, because the seasons this year have been so acute, Schultheis says some folks may be experiencing allergy symptoms for the first time. She says that simply may be a factor of age. You're older, but so is your immune system.

"Let's say, for instance, they've never had allergies as a 20 year old to dust, pollen or pet dander or any other, or mold," says Dr. Schultheis. "And, all of a sudden they're exposed to it and they become allergic to it. And because their immune system is weak it's unable to fight it as it used to do in the past."

The good news, of course, is that both conditions are self-treatable.

For a cold the cure is rest, hydration, over-the-counter medications for the fever and aches, plus a vaporizer. Over-the-counter antihistamines and staying away from the cause of your allergy should help curb the sneezing, itching and watery eyes.

Dr. Schultheis cautions, if problems persist, call your physician.