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As temperatures go down, remember that the threat of the common cold and influenza traditionally rises. The nation's emergency physicians want to make sure you know the difference between the two and what, if anything, you can do to prevent from getting either. Prevention is key. Get your influenza vaccination.

"It's hard to escape the common cold or the flu," said Dr. Andrew Sama, president of the American College of Emergency Physicians. "It can be even more difficult telling their symptoms apart at times."

Flu

Seasonal influenza, which is commonly known as "the flu" may affect between 5 to as high as 20 percent of the U.S. population depending on the year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). More than 200,000 people are hospitalized each year for flu-related complications and about 36,000 people die each year from the flu.

Older people, young children, pregnant women and those with certain chronic health conditions are at higher risk. It spreads from person to person by direct contact or through virus-infected droplets coughed or sneezed in the air. The best way to protect against the flu is to get vaccinated every year. The ideal time for that is usually before flu season begins–which typically peaks in January and will last through about March.

Signs and symptoms of the flu may include:

- High fever (usually 100 degrees F to 103 degrees F in adults and often higher in children)
- Chills
- Headache
- Fatigue
- Muscle Aches
- Dizziness
- Loss of appetite
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Weakness
- Ear Infection
- Diarrhea

Call your primary care doctor or go to the nearest emergency department if you feel it's necessary and if symptoms are severe or worsen.

Both the common cold and flu are caused by viruses, and therefore do not respond to antibiotics. Flu symptoms usually are more severe than the typical sneezing, stuffiness and congestion that go along with a cold. Flu symptoms also tend to develop quickly–typically between one and four days after a person is exposed to the flu virus, and people are contagious from 24 hours before they become ill until their symptoms resolve.

Common Colds

Colds are far less serious than the flu and may be treated with over-the-counter decongestants, cough medicines or plain old rest and fluids. If you choose to use medications, follow the

instructions on the label carefully. The best way to prevent colds is to wash your hands regularly and avoid contact with people who have colds or other upper respiratory infections.

Signs and symptoms of colds include:

• An initial tickle in the throat
• A runny or stuffy nose and sneezing
• Cough
• Sore throat
• Headache
• Mild fever
• Mild fatigue
• Mild muscle aches
• Loss of appetite
• A change in nasal discharge from watery to thick yellow or green.

“We want you to stay healthy this winter and take proper care of yourself,” said Dr. Sama. “In most instances, these illnesses cause a few days of discomfort. But sometimes, it can be more serious. Emergency physicians are standing by ready to treat you if it’s necessary.”