

It's Not *Just* the Flu

Many people will say they have the flu when they really have a cold.

**What is the difference between a cold and the flu?
And why is it important to know the difference?**

Below, we explain why it's not "just" the flu.



Higher Fevers = More Damage

The flu comes with much higher body temperatures than your average cold. The higher your fever, the more your body is working to fight an illness. It's important to know how the symptoms of a high fever reflect what is actually happening in your body.

- You shiver and get chills during a high fever because your body is turning all of your heat inward.
- You turn pale because your blood vessels are contracting at their ends to keep the heat focused inside your body.
- To maintain the increased heat, your heart will start working harder.
- You will start to dehydrate more quickly as the heat evaporates your fluids.
- As your immune system ramps up, it causes inflammation which can make your body feel tired and achy.
- Finally, if your body gets hot enough, it can start to affect your brain. You can become confused, delirious, or even have a seizure.

Surviving ≠ Thriving

Tens of thousands of people get the flu every year. Many of those people will be back on their feet in a week or two and simply remember it as one of the worst illnesses they've ever had. But for others, surviving does not equal thriving.

If the inflammation gets too intense in any part of your body, it can cause lasting damage. Some people have to have limbs amputated. Others have permanent heart, lung, or brain damage.

More Damage = More Danger

What is happening in your body during a fever can be particularly dangerous for certain people.

Children: Each year, over 100 children die of the flu in the U.S. In the past four flu seasons, that number has been closer to 200. That's not because the children were unhealthy. In fact, the flu can kill even healthy children in less than 24 hours. That's because children's immune systems can overreact to the flu virus, making all of the effects from a fever more severe. For example, children are more likely to have seizures if their fevers get quite high. These are known as febrile seizures. While those types of seizures are usually harmless, they are quite scary. Other side effects like inflammation can cause the immune system to begin attacking other parts of the body as it works to kill the virus.

Older adults: Older adults actually have the opposite reaction to flu than children. As you age, your immune system does not respond as well to threats as it did when you were younger. That means the flu virus can take over more of your cells before your immune system reacts. Sometimes, your immune system simply can't fight back in time. Tens of thousands of older adults die from the flu each year and many thousands more are hospitalized.

Chronic conditions: High fevers put extra stress on your whole body, so if you have a chronic condition such as heart disease, lung disease, or diabetes, flu can be especially dangerous. Thousands of people with chronic conditions are hospitalized and die each year from the flu.



To help avoid some or all of these effects, get a flu vaccine.

The flu vaccine cannot completely prevent you from getting the flu, but it can make it less severe, resulting in a lower fever. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about whether a flu vaccine is right for you.

