

STOP THE SNIFFLES: Summertime colds, allergies share symptoms, but treatments are not the same

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It used to be that if you had a runny or stuffy nose in the summertime it was likely allergies. But for a variety of reasons these days, including air conditioners that recirculate air in tightly sealed buildings in the same way heating does in the winter — people often come to work with colds.

“Summertime colds are much more common than they used to be,” says David Sargent, D.O., an ear, nose and throat specialist who recently joined the medical staff at Hopkins County Memorial Hospital.

But Hopkins County is also home to high levels of common allergens. How can you tell if you have allergies or a cold?

“The biggest problem I see is the difficulty patients have in telling colds from allergies,” says Dr. Sargent. “Colds and allergies share a large number of symptoms, and if a cold is not severe it can be very difficult to tell one from the other. But the treatment for a cold is not the same as for allergy.”

Suspect allergies if your symptoms come on, for example, if you go outside for a walk and get a stuffy nose. Of course, when tree pollen counts are high it can be hard to track when your symptoms start during Spring, which is the tree pollen season. Telltale signs of a cold include fever, muscle aches, malaise, fatigue, cough and lymph node enlargement but, these may not always be present.

Controlling allergies. To treat allergies you need to prevent the symptoms. All of the treatments of allergies involve the prevention of symptoms by the very mechanism of the treatment.

“If you stop treatment you stop prevention and the symptoms come back. If you have seasonal allergies, you have to treat them for the whole season,” Dr. Sargent says.

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Start with an antihistamine — if your allergies are mild, that's all you'll need. If that is not enough, you may need to add a topical nasal steroid to your regimen or use allergy shots. If your symptoms recur when you're taking medication, especially after a period of good control, you are probably dealing with a cold, whether you acknowledge it or not. Only about 20 percent of the population has allergies, while all people are susceptible to viral respiratory infections (colds).

Beating a cold. For a cold that won't quit, make sure you're getting plenty of sleep.

“Your immune system is most active during sleep,” says Dr. Sargent. “If you get nine hours of sleep a night your cold should only last seven to 10 days. If you're getting six hours, the cold can go on and on.”

Dr. Sargent also notes that sore throats, tonsillitis, sinus or ear infections and bronchitis are secondary infections that almost always occur in the setting of a cold.