

## **Is it the cold or the flu?**

By Lynnda Campbell, CRNP

Yes, it is that time of year again. With the arrival of the school buses and cooler weather (hopefully soon!) also comes the cold and flu viruses that love to play havoc with the health of both children and adults. While both illnesses are caused by different viruses, it can sometimes be difficult to tell them apart since they share many similarities. It also may be difficult know when to seek medical help.

The symptoms that they share include stuffy or runny nose, sore throat, and cough. What separates them is the severity. Some people refer to the flu as a “cold on steroids”. Colds tend to come on more gradually and most people can still function with a cold. The flu tends to come on hard and fast. If your child has a high fever (102 and higher), feels achy all over and doesn't feel like getting out of bed, he most likely infected with the flu.

Since both the flu and cold are caused by viruses, treatment with antibiotics, which only treat bacterial infections, will not help. Colds typically last 5-7 days and are best treated symptomatically with over the counter medication appropriate for age. Humidifiers and vaporizers are also often helpful. If your child have symptoms that are more reflective of the flu, it is advisable to visit your doctor to see if an antiviral medication is appropriate. These medications should be started within 48 hours of the onset of symptoms to be effective. The sooner you can go to the doctor the better. While not a “cure,” these medications can reduce the severity and duration of the flu by 1-2 days. These medications are particularly helpful in preventing serious complications, such as pneumonia, in those individuals that are most susceptible. They include young infants, asthmatics, and diabetics. You should also visit your doctor if your child's symptoms last longer than 7 days as that could indicate some secondary infections, such as ear or sinus infection.

Please remember, as with most things, the best defense is a good offense. Most importantly in regards to the flu, this is the annual flu vaccine!