

- Influenza

HOW TO TELL IF YOU HAVE STREP OR FLU

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WINTER has brought more than cold weather — Americans are getting socked by surging strep A! Though it can be hard to differentiate between the bacterial infection and viruses such as the flu, experts say strep displays some distinct symptoms.



The illness, commonly referred to as strep throat, is caused by the bacteria group A *Streptococcus*. It typically triggers headaches, stomachaches, painful sore throats, muscle aches and fever.

While those can be characteristics of the flu, the Centers for Disease Control says strep is also frequently accompanied by red and swollen tonsils — sometimes with white patches or streaks of pus — tiny red spots on the roof of the mouth and swollen lymph nodes in the front of the neck.

Children in particular may experience nausea or vomiting. And in less than 10 percent of strep patients, the bacteria's toxins cause them to develop a red, sandpaperlike skin rash — which is what gives scarlet fever its name.

The highly contagious disease is spread through respiratory droplets released by an infected person talking, coughing or sneezing, and symptoms appear two to five days after exposure. People most at risk are those over 65 or under five and pregnant and post-partum women.

But experts warn strep is more serious than a simple cold and requires prescription antibiotics.

If untreated, strep throat can kill in rare cases or lead to rheumatic fever — a severe illness that causes painfully swollen joints and serious cardiac issues, such as weakened valves or an enlarged heart!