

# *Taking Care of Yourself and Your Family in the Cold and Flu Season*

## **Overview**

Ways to take care of yourself and your family in the cold and flu season.

- What are the symptoms of colds and flu?
- What kinds of treatments can help?
- What medications are available?
- What if your child gets sick?
- When should you see a doctor?
- The flu vaccine
- Who should get the flu vaccine?
- People who should not get the flu vaccine
- Is there a way to avoid getting a cold?

Colds are by far the most common illness in the U.S. More than 90 percent of all Americans have at least one cold a year, and many have several or more. Influenza, or flu, is similar to a cold and may have some of the same symptoms. Both colds and flu are infections caused by viruses that invade the respiratory tract.

Because there is no cure for colds or flu, prevention is the best medicine. By taking care of yourself during the peak months for colds and flu, you may be able to avoid getting or ease the symptoms of these common conditions.

## **What are the symptoms of colds and flu?**

Although they may have similar symptoms, colds and flu are different. Colds tend to begin slowly, and people may sense that they're getting a cold before most signs appear. Flu symptoms often seem to appear "out of nowhere" when someone who's been feeling fine suddenly gets a severe headache or a feeling of extreme exhaustion.

## **Colds**

Colds usually begin two to three days after you've been infected with a cold virus. The symptoms include

- sore or scratchy throat
- sneezing
- runny nose
- mild cough
- normal or slightly elevated temperature
- decrease in appetite
- decrease in energy

These symptoms tend to be worse in infants and young children, who may have temperatures of up to 102 degrees. In both children and adults, a cold usually lasts from seven to ten days but may last up to 14 days. The nasal drainage that

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accompanies a cold often turns green about three to four days into the cold, but it does not indicate that a sinus infection is present.

### Flu

Flu symptoms typically appear one to four days after exposure to the influenza virus. These signs include:

- fever
- headache
- extreme fatigue
- dry cough
- muscle aches
- stuffy nose
- sore throat

Fevers of 102 to 104 degrees are common with the flu, and they typically go down on the second or third day after symptoms appear. After that, many people begin to have a sore throat or stuffy nose. People who have had the flu may feel fatigue or weakness for days or even weeks after other symptoms have disappeared.

The flu rarely causes nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea. What some people call “stomach flu” is usually an illness such as gastroenteritis.

The flu can be more serious than the common cold because it may cause dangerous complications, particularly in older adults, infants, and people with chronic conditions, such as asthma or other respiratory ailments.

### **What kinds of treatments can help?**

You can take several steps to feel better when you have a cold or flu:

- *Get lots of rest.* Your body needs energy to fight a cold or virus, and resting lets you save your energy for your most important task, which is to get better.
- *Drink plenty of fluids.* Drinking plenty of fluids (preferably water or juices without caffeine or alcohol) a day can keep you hydrated, which is especially important if you have a fever.
- *Use a humidifier or steam vaporizer.* A humidifier or vaporizer -- an electric device that puts moisture into the air -- can further reduce the risk of dehydration and may ease chest or nasal congestion. Most doctors do not recommend putting anything but water into the humidifier or vaporizer. Clean your humidifier

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regularly to keep mold from growing. Be sure, if you have a child, that a hot vaporizer is out of reach.

- *Gargle with warm salt water to ease a scratchy throat.*

Many people wonder if they can ease or prevent colds by taking vitamin C or supplements made from zinc or the Echinacea plant. Here are some facts:

- *Vitamin C.* Several large research studies have found “no conclusive evidence” that vitamin C helps to prevent colds, according to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) The NIAID ([www.niaid.nih.gov/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.niaid.nih.gov/Pages/default.aspx)) says that although “the vitamin may reduce the severity or duration of symptoms, there is no definitive evidence.” Taking vitamin C for long periods in large amounts can be harmful. It can distort the results of blood and urine tests and cause severe diarrhea, which can be especially dangerous in children and older people.
- *Zinc.* Scientific research on treating a cold with zinc has had mixed results. Some studies have found zinc helpful, while others showed that it has no effect. Taking too much zinc can make you feel nauseated and raise your cholesterol levels.
- *Echinacea.* This plant contains substances that can boost your immune system and may help to fight an infection caused by a cold virus, but studies have shown that it will not help to prevent colds.

#### **What medications are available?**

No proven cure exists for either a cold or flu, and both conditions go away on their own after they have run their course. Until they do, some over-the-counter, nonprescription remedies may make you feel more comfortable. Over-the-counter cold and flu remedies such as decongestants or cough suppressants may help some symptoms, but they do not prevent or shorten the length of a cold or the flu. Many of these medicines also have side effects, such as drying out your nose, keeping you up at night, drowsiness or an upset stomach, so they should be taken with care.

If you’re considering taking an over-the-counter medication, read the label carefully to make sure that the product is right for your symptoms. If you are on any other medications, including over-the-counter medications or herbal supplements, check with your doctor before taking any over-the-counter medications to avoid the possibility of interactions. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recommends that you follow these guidelines:

**If you want to do this**

Unclog a stuffy nose

Quiet a cough

Loosen mucus so that you can cough it up

Ease fever, headaches, or minor aches and pains

Soothe a sore throat

**Choose a medication with this**

Saline nasal sprays.

Cough suppressant. If you have a history of asthma, check with your health care provider to see if you should take cough suppressants.

Expectorant (Drinking lots of water can also help loosen mucus.)

Pain reliever (analgesic), such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen.

Medicated sprays or lozenges (cough drops). Liquids also help.

It's important *not* to take antibiotics for a cold or flu because *antibiotics do not work against viruses*. Don't ask your doctor to prescribe these, and don't try to ease your symptoms by taking an antibiotic prescribed for another illness. If you are prescribed an antibiotic for an additional (nonviral) infection, be sure to take all that has been prescribed. Never take an antibiotic (or other medications, for that matter) that has been prescribed for another person, as there could be drug interactions or side effects that may be harmful to you. Taking another person's medication also means he or she will not have enough to treat their own infection.

Note: In some cases, a doctor may prescribe an antiviral drug to help slow the reproduction of the flu virus in your body. Antiviral drugs work most effectively if taken within two days of developing symptoms. They basically help to keep an illness milder and shorter, and therefore may reduce the risk of developing serious flu-related complications.

**What if your child gets sick?**

Many cold and flu remedies can have harmful effects when given to children, so it's best to talk to a pediatrician before giving any medication to a child.

- *Never give aspirin to a child who is suffering or recovering from a cold or flu.* Aspirin has been linked to the development of a rare but serious condition known as Reye's syndrome in children. The American Academy of Pediatrics ([www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)) warns against giving aspirin or any medication containing aspirin to any child or teenager who has a viral illness, especially flu or chicken pox. Pepto-Bismol has some similarities to aspirin, and should be avoided with children. Talk to your pediatrician if you believe that your child needs pain relief for headaches, muscle aches, or a similar condition.

- *Never give your child a cold or flu remedy intended for adults only.* Many medicines that are safe for adults can be dangerous if taken by children.
- *Do not give any over-the-counter or nonprescription cold or cough medicines to children under the age of 4.* This can cause rare but very serious complications, including death. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that these medications *not* be given to children under the age of 4, and many doctors recommend against giving these medications to children under the age of 6 because of the lack of safety testing for this age group.

### **When should you see a doctor?**

It's vital to see a doctor if your symptoms get worse instead of better in the usual time or if you've been exposed to someone who has had strep throat. It's also important to call if you have any of the following symptoms:

- severe or continuous vomiting or diarrhea, particularly if you are not urinating regularly, if there is blood in your bowel movement or your vomit, or if you or your child are having belly pain with the vomiting or diarrhea
- a fever of 100 degrees or higher for more than two days
- shaking chills with a fever of 100 degrees or higher
- an earache or discharge from the ear (especially in children)
- a throat that is swollen, pus-infected, or beefy red (not just bright pink)
- a stiff neck or pain in joints (instead of muscle aches in the leg or back)
- difficulty breathing, uncontrolled coughing, or persistent wheezing
- a severe headache that lasts for more than 24 hours, particularly if accompanied by vomiting
- a skin rash or swollen glands
- chest pain that gets worse with breathing
- yellow, green, or rust-colored phlegm or mucus that lasts for more than ten days
- a cough that involves a fever or chest pain or that does not go away in 10 days
- a cough that is in spasms, making it difficult for you to get your breath
- a cough that occurs only at night or with exercise

### **The flu vaccine**

The best way to protect yourself against the flu is to get a flu vaccine each fall. This flu vaccine doesn't provide 100 percent protection against the flu, but it can significantly reduce your chances of getting the flu.

There are two types of flu vaccines:

- *The “flu shot”* is a vaccine that contains inactive strains of the flu virus and is given with a needle. The flu shot is approved for use in people older than 6 months, including healthy people and people with chronic medical conditions. This shot is now recommended for all children younger than 18 years old. Anyone under the age of 9 who receives the shot for the first time will need two doses the first year, given four weeks apart. A higher-strength flu shot is available for adults 65 years of age and older.
- *The nasal-spray flu vaccine* (sometimes called LAIV for “Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine”) is made with live, weakened flu viruses that do not cause the flu. The LAIV is approved for use in *healthy* people ages 2 to 49 who are not pregnant. It should not be given to anyone with Asthma or a weakened immune system, as well as someone who lives with someone with a weakened immune system.

About two weeks after vaccination, antibodies that protect against influenza viral infection develop. The flu vaccine does not cause the flu and is very safe and most people don’t have any reaction to the vaccine at all.

### **Who should get the flu vaccine?**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that with some exceptions, everyone over 6 months old should get the flu vaccine.

It is especially important that people in the following groups get vaccinated because they have a higher risk of developing flu-related problems or they live with or care for people who a higher risk.

- pregnant women
- children younger than 5 years old, especially younger than 2 years old
- people who are 65 years old or older
- people who have certain medical conditions, including asthma, neurological and neurodevelopmental conditions, chronic lung disease, heart disease, blood disorders, kidney disorders, endocrine disorders, liver disorders, metabolic disorders, a weakened immune system (due to medication or disease), chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and people who are morbidly obese (have a body mass index of over 30) or those under 19 who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy

The CDC also says that last season “American Indians and Alaskan Natives seemed to be at higher risk of flu-related complications.”

Other people for whom getting the vaccine is especially important include:

- people who live in nursing homes or long-term care facilities

- people who live with or care for those at high risk for flu-related complications, including health care workers and household contacts of people at high risk for complications from flu, such as caregivers of children under the age of 5 and especially under the age of 6 months

### **People who should *not* get the flu vaccine**

The following should *not* get vaccinated without first consulting their health care provider:

- people who have a severe allergy to chicken eggs, particularly with breathing trouble. Some people with egg allergies may still be able to obtain flu vaccination.
- people who have had a severe reaction to an influenza vaccination
- people who developed Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS) within 6 weeks of getting an influenza vaccine
- children under 6 months of age
- people who have a moderate-to-severe illness with a fever (who should wait to get vaccinated until after their symptoms lessen)

If you get sick with the flu, get plenty of rest and drink lots of fluids. If you have any respiratory problems, such as asthma, or if you're at risk for complications from the flu, visit your health care provider as soon as possible if you become ill.

For more information, visit [www.flu.gov](http://www.flu.gov) or call 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636).

### **Is there a way to avoid getting a cold?**

The only way to keep from catching a cold is to avoid contact with anyone who may be infected with a cold virus. That's usually impossible because symptoms may not yet have appeared in many infected people. You can't avoid colds by staying warm, keeping away from drafts, or exercising regularly. You may do all those things and still get a cold if you come into contact with a cold virus.

The best way to avoid colds is to stay as healthy as possible by eating well, getting enough exercise and sleep, and limiting contact with infected people, if possible. In addition, don't smoke or use tobacco products.

- *Wash your hands frequently.* You may be able to prevent some viruses from reaching your eyes, nose, or mouth by washing your hands several times a day. Use hot water and plenty of soap, and rub your hands for at least 15 seconds before rinsing. If you can't wash your hands when you need to, use alcohol-based hand sanitizer to decrease your risk of infection. Consider keeping hand sanitizer at your work station and using it before drinking or eating, or even working at your computer.

- *Keep your hands away from your face.* This may prevent viruses from entering into your body. Don't rub your eyes, which can be vulnerable to infection.
- *To lower the risk of infecting others, turn away from them when you cough or sneeze* and always sneeze or cough into a tissue and throw it away immediately. Keep tissues at your desk at work and close at hand in your home. If you don't have a tissue, sneeze or cough into the crook of your arm instead of your hands. Wash or sanitize your hands each time you blow your nose.
- *Avoid close contact with people who are sick.* If you are sick, stay home if you can, and avoid travel and crowds.
- *Avoid sharing towels and eating and drinking utensils with family members.* This is especially important if someone in your family already has a cold or the flu.
- *Put your toothbrush into the dishwasher for sanitizing once a week.* This will help prevent germs from spreading around your home.
- *Clean the mouthpieces of your phones at home and at work on a regular basis.*
- *Wipe your desk with a disinfecting cloth once a week to remove germs.* Wiping doorknobs and sinks with disinfectant (or spraying with disinfectant spray) each night before bed will also help to keep germs away.

These steps may reduce your exposure to the viruses that cause colds and flu, but they probably won't keep you from getting sick. If you do get a cold or the flu, follow the advice above and give yourself time to recover from your illness.

The program that provided this publication has many additional resources on staying healthy during cold and flu season.

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