HOW TO FIGHT COLDS AND FLU

A Guide to Prevention and Self-Care

Treating Colds

REST as much as you can for the first few days of a cold to let the body rally its defenses against the virus and to prevent spreading it to others. Remember: Colds are contagious for the first 2-3 days of symptoms.

SELECT a specific over-the-counter medication to relieve your biggest discomfort. Examples: acetaminophen or ibuprofen for headache, muscle aches or fever; cough suppressant for a dry cough that won't let you sleep; decongestant for a stuffy or runny nose. Avoid antihistamine and combination medications to limit the chances of undesirable side effects.

DRINK lots of liquids. It will help you replace lost fluids and also loosen and clear mucus from your throat and chest.

GARGLE with warm, salty water to relieve a sore throat. Tip: Mix one teaspoon of salt per glass.

TAKE a warm shower or use a vaporizer to ease congestion, sinus headache and cough.

When to Get Help

- If any symptom lasts longer than 10 days
- If coughing is severe, uncontrollable, painful or brings up rust-colored or gray-green material
- If sore throat is severe and lasts 2 days or more
- If breathing is persistently painful, wheezy or difficult
- If there is pain in the face or forehead
- If there is severe earache or discharge from the ear
- If there is fever of 102 F or greater
- If your colds are often complicated by bronchitis or ear infections

Note: If you are especially concerned, look or feel worse than with your usual cold or have any questions, call your doctor.

How Is the Flu Different?

Influenza — the flu — is caused by a different group of viruses that most often spread through the air. Flu symptoms are similar to those of colds, but can be more severe or even fatal, especially in people who are not well to begin with. The good news: An anti-flu vaccine is available.

Who should get a flu shot

In general, those who wish to reduce their chances of catching the flu should consider yearly vaccination. The vaccine is especially recommended for people at high risk of complications from the flu, including anyone over age 65; and people with chronic conditions such as heart, lung or kidney problems, diabetes or low immunity.

Who should not

Individuals who are allergic to eggs should avoid getting the flu shot unless otherwise directed by their physicians. Reason: Flu vaccines contain egg protein and may cause serious allergic reactions in people with egg allergies.

WHAT IS A COLD?

The common cold is a contagious disease caused by any of about 200 viruses that can infect the nose, throat, voice box, trachea (windpipe) and lungs. Cold viruses most often spread through hand-to-hand contact, touching contaminated objects or inhaling droplets from another person's sneeze or cough.

Can colds be serious? Usually colds are not serious and go away on their own, lasting a week to 10 days at most. Sometimes bacterial infections can set in and complicate a cold, spreading beyond the nose and throat to the middle ear, sinuses or lungs. These require medical attention. It isn't always easy to tell if you have developed a bacterial infection. Sometimes bacterial infections will make you sicker than a regular cold; for example, you might have a prolonged fever. ***A general rule of thumb is to seek medical attention if any symptom lasts longer than 10 days.***

Cold & Flu Facts

FACT: Antibiotics don't work against viruses — including cold and flu viruses.

FACT: There's no clear-cut evidence that large doses of any vitamin, including vitamin C, can totally prevent or cure colds.

FACT: You can't catch a cold from wet hair, wet feet or exposure to chilly weather or drafts. Viruses, not weather conditions, cause colds.

FACT: Research shows that chicken soup helps relieve cold symptoms. How: It helps unclog nasal passages.

Cold Symptoms

- Chills
- Fatigue
- Watery eyes
- Sore throat
- Dry cough
- Slight fever (usually under 102 F)
- Headache
- Body aches
- Mouth cold sores
- Stuffy/runny nose

Preventing Colds

1. **Wash** hands frequently during cold and flu season — especially after visiting public places or shaking hands with others.
2. **Cover** your coughs and sneezes. Blow your nose with tissues, and dispose of used ones promptly to control the spread of viruses.
3. **Keep** your hands away from your face. Reason: Cold viruses usually find their way into the body when a person touches their nose, mouth or eyes with contaminated hands.
4. **Stay** away from people who have colds, if possible.
5. **Avoid** sharing towels, utensils, food, drinks, telephones and keyboards.
6. **Increase** ventilation, whenever possible, to help clear viruses from the air.
7. **Exercise,** get sufficient sleep and eat well-balanced meals. Reason: Poor physical condition, fatigue and stress make you more susceptible to infection.

To Get Hands Really Clean

- Scrub vigorously with soap and warm water for at least 10 seconds.
- Pay special attention to areas where germs accumulate: between fingers, in hand creases and under fingernails.
- Rinse hands thoroughly to wash away the germs.

This information is not intended as a substitute for professional care. Medical Editor: Zsofia Fester, M.D.
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