

Quick Information for Your Health

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES • FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION

What to Do for Colds and Flu

Is It a Cold Or The Flu? Know The Difference

A cold and the flu (also called influenza) are alike in many ways. But the flu can sometimes lead to more serious problems, such as pneumonia.

A stuffy nose, sore throat, and sneezing are usually signs of a cold. Tiredness, fever, headache, and major aches and pains probably mean you have the flu.

Coughing can be a sign of either a cold or the flu. But a bad cough usually points to the flu.

Know When To Call Your Doctor

You usually do not have to call your doctor right away if you have signs of a cold or flu. But you should call your doctor in these situations:

- Your symptoms get worse.
- Your symptoms last a long time.
- After feeling a little better, you show signs of a more serious problem. Some of these signs are a sick-to-your-stomach feeling, vomiting, high fever, shaking, chills, chest pain, or coughing with thick, yellow-green mucus.

Try to Avoid Getting a Cold

- Wash your hands often. You can pick up cold germs easily, even when shaking someone's hand or touching doorknobs or handrails.
- Avoid people with colds when possible.
- Sneeze or cough into a tissue and then throw the tissue away.
- Clean surfaces you touch with a germ-killing disinfectant.
- Don't touch your nose, eyes, or mouth. Germs can enter your body easily by these paths.

Try to Avoid Getting The Flu

A flu shot can greatly lower your chance of getting the flu. The best time to get the shot is from the middle of October to the middle of November, because most people get the flu in the winter.

The shot can't cause the flu. But you may feel sore or weak or have a fever for a few days.

Who Should Get a Flu Shot?

Almost all people who want to lower their chance of coming down with the flu can get a flu shot.



Flu shots are most important for:

- people 65 or older
- nursing home patients
- people over 6 months old with health problems, such as asthma, or with long-term diseases, such as HIV or heart disease
- children or teen-agers who must often take aspirin
- people who are often around older people or those with health problems.

Who Might Not Be Able to Get a Flu Shot?

Talk to your doctor before you get the shot if you:

- have certain allergies, especially to eggs
- have an illness, such as pneumonia
- have a high fever
- are pregnant.

Prescription Medicine Can Prevent Flu, Too

If you are one of those who should not get the flu shot, ask your doctor about prescription medicine to help prevent flu.

And if you get the flu, taking this medicine within the first 48 hours can make your illness less serious.

But Do Not Take Antibiotics For a Cold or Flu

Antibiotics won't work against cold and flu germs. And, you should take antibiotics only when really needed.

Help Yourself Feel Better While You Are Sick

A cold usually lasts only a few days to a week. Tiredness from the flu may continue for several weeks.

To feel better while you are sick:

- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Use a humidifier—an electric device that puts water into the air.
- Take a cough and cold medicine you buy without a prescription. It may help.

Choose the Right Medicines For Your Symptoms

Make sure the label states that it treats your symptoms.

If you want to:	Choose medicine with:
Unclog a stuffy nose	Nasal decongestant
Quiet a cough	Cough suppressant
Loosen mucus so that you can cough it up	Expectorant
Stop runny nose and sneezing	Antihistamine
Ease fever, headaches, minor aches and pains	Pain reliever (Analgesic)





Protect Your Children From 'Salicylates' In Cold Medicines

Do not give aspirin or other salicylates to children or teen-agers with symptoms of a cold or flu.

If you aren't sure if a product has salicylates, ask your doctor or pharmacist.

Young people can get sick or die from a rare condition called Reye syndrome if they take these medicines while they have these symptoms.

Do You Have Other Questions?

The FDA may have an office near you. Look for the number in the blue pages of the phone book.

You can also call the FDA on its toll-free number: (888) INFO-FDA (463-6332).

Or you can find the FDA on the Internet at www.fda.gov

The Food and Drug Administration is an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that makes sure medicines for illnesses like colds and flu work and are safe.

FDA05-1105C