

Get Set for Winter Illness Season



Tips for Avoiding Winter Bugs:

- Get vaccinated against flu
- Wash your hands often
- Limit exposure to infected people
- Keep stress in check
- Eat right
- Sleep right
- Exercise

In much of the Northern Hemisphere, this is prime time for colds, influenza (flu), and other respiratory illnesses.

While contagious viruses are active year-round, fall and winter are when we're all most vulnerable to them. This is due in large part to people spending more time indoors with others when the weather gets cold.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulates medicines and vaccines that help fight winter illnesses.

Colds and Flu

Most respiratory bugs come and go within a few days, with no lasting effects. However, some cause serious health problems. Although symptoms of colds and flu can be similar, the two are different.

Colds are usually distinguished by a stuffy or runny nose and sneezing. Other symptoms include coughing, a scratchy throat, and watery eyes. No vaccine against colds exists because they can be caused by many types of viruses. Often spread through contact with mucus, colds come on gradually.

Flu comes on suddenly, is more serious, and lasts longer than colds. The good news is that yearly vaccination can help protect you from getting the flu. Flu season in the United States generally runs from November to April.

Flu symptoms include fever, headache, chills, dry cough, body aches, fatigue, and general misery. Like colds, flu can cause a stuffy or runny nose, sneezing, and watery eyes. Young children may also experience nausea and vomiting with flu.

Usually, colds and flu simply have to be allowed to run their course.

Prevention Tips

• **Get vaccinated against flu.** Flu complications cause an average of 36,000 deaths each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Flu vaccine, available as a shot or a nasal spray, remains the best way to prevent and control influenza. The best time to get a flu vaccination is from October through November, although getting it in December and January is not too late. A new flu shot is needed every year because the predominant flu viruses change every year.

Everyone—children, adolescents, adults, and elderly people—should be vaccinated.

Certain people are more at risk for developing complications from flu; they should be immunized as soon as vaccine is available. These groups include:

- people 65 and older
- residents of nursing homes or other places that house people with chronic medical conditions such as diabetes, asthma, and heart disease
- adults and children with heart or lung disorders, including asthma
- adults and children who have required regular medical follow-up or hospitalization during the preceding year because of chronic metabolic diseases (including diabetes), kidney dysfunction, a weakened immune system, or disorders caused by abnormalities of hemoglobin (a protein in red blood cells that carries oxygen)
- young people ages 6 months to 18 years receiving long-term aspirin therapy, and who as a result might be at risk for developing Reye's syndrome after being infected with influenza (See aspirin information in the section "Taking OTC Products.")

Also, flu vaccination for health care workers is urged because unvaccinated workers can be a primary cause of outbreaks in health care settings.

Talk to your doctor before getting vaccinated if you have certain allergies, especially to eggs; have an illness, such as pneumonia; have a high fever; or are pregnant.

• **Wash your hands often.** Teach children to do the same. Both colds and flu can be passed through coughing, sneezing, and contaminated surfaces, including the hands.

CDC recommends regular washing of your hands with warm, soapy water for about 15 seconds.

• **Try to limit exposure to infected people.** Keep infants away from crowds for the first few months of life. This is especially important for premature babies who may have underlying abnormalities such as lung or heart disease.

• **Practice healthy habits.**

- Eat a balanced diet.
- Get enough sleep.
- Exercise. It can help the immune system better fight off the germs that cause illness.
- Do your best to keep stress in check.

Also, people who use tobacco or who are exposed to secondhand smoke are more prone to respiratory illnesses and more severe complications than nonsmokers.

Already Sick?

Usually, colds and flu simply have to be allowed to run their course. You can try to relieve symptoms without taking medicine. Gargling with salt

water may relieve a sore throat. And a cool-mist humidifier may help relieve stuffy noses.

Here are other steps to consider:

• **First, call your doctor.** This will ensure that the best course of treatment can be started early.

• **If you are sick, try not to make others sick too.** Limit your exposure to other people. Also, **cover your mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, and throw** used tissues into the trash immediately.

• **Stay hydrated and rested.** Fluids can help loosen mucus and make you feel better, especially if you have a fever. Avoid alcoholic and caffeinated products. These may dehydrate you.

• **Know your medicine options.** If you choose to use medicine, there are over-the-counter (OTC) options that can help relieve the symptoms of colds and flu.

If you want to unclog a stuffy nose, then nasal decongestants may help. Cough suppressants quiet coughs; expectorants loosen mucus so you can cough it up; antihistamines help stop a runny nose and sneezing; and pain relievers can ease fever, headaches, and minor aches.

In addition, there are prescription antiviral medications approved by FDA that are indicated for treating the flu. Talk to your health care professional to find out what will work best for you.

Taking OTC Products

Be wary of unproven treatments. It's best to use treatments that have been approved by FDA. Many people believe that products with certain ingredients—

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vitamin C or Echinacea, for example—can treat winter illnesses.

Unless FDA has approved a product for treatment of specific symptoms, you cannot assume that the product will treat those symptoms. Tell your health care professionals about any supplements or herbal remedies you use.

Read medicine labels carefully and follow directions. People with certain health conditions, such as high blood pressure, should check with a health care professional or pharmacist before taking a new cough and cold medicine. Some medicines can worsen underlying health problems.

Choose appropriate OTC medicines. Choose OTC medicines specifically for your symptoms. If all you have is a runny nose, only use a medicine that treats a runny nose. This can keep you from unnecessarily doubling up on ingredients, a practice that can prove harmful.

Check the medicine's side effects. Certain medications such as antihistamines can cause drowsiness. Medications can interact with food, alcohol, dietary supplements, and each other.

The safest strategy is to make sure your health care professional and pharmacist know about every product you are taking, including non-prescription drugs and any dietary supplements such as vitamins, minerals, and herbals.

Check with a doctor before giving medicine to children. Get medical advice before treating children suffer-

ing from cold and flu symptoms. Do not give children medication that is labeled only for adults.

Don't give aspirin or aspirin-containing medicines to children and teenagers. Children and teenagers suffering from flu-like symptoms, chickenpox, and other viral illnesses shouldn't take aspirin.

Reye's syndrome, a rare and potentially fatal disease found mainly in children, has been associated with using aspirin to treat flu or chickenpox in kids. Reye's syndrome can affect the blood, liver, and brain.

Some medicine labels may refer to aspirin as salicylate or salicylic acid. Be sure to educate teenagers, who may take OTC medicines without their parents' knowledge.

When to See a Doctor

See a health care professional if you aren't getting any better or if your symptoms worsen. Mucus buildup from a viral infection can lead to a bacterial infection.

With children, be alert for high fevers and for abnormal behavior such as unusual drowsiness, refusal to eat, crying a lot, holding the ears or stomach, and wheezing.

Signs of trouble for all people can include

- a cough that disrupts sleep
- a fever that won't go down
- increased shortness of breath
- face pain caused by a sinus infection
- worsening of symptoms, high fever, chest pain, or a difference in the mucus you're producing, all after feeling better for a short time

Cold and flu complications may include bacterial infections (e.g., bronchitis, sinusitis, ear infections, and pneumonia) that could require antibiotics.

Remember: While antibiotics are used against bacterial infections, they don't help against viral infections such as the cold or flu. [FDA](#)

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Using OTC Cough and Cold Products in Children
www.fda.gov/consumer/updates/coughcold102208.html

Vaccines Stand Ready for Flu Season
www.fda.gov/consumer/updates/influenzavaccine102307.html

Combating Antibiotic Resistance
www.fda.gov/consumer/updates/antibiotics050108.html

Flu Information
www.fda.gov/oc/opacom/hottopics/flu.html

Importance of Influenza Vaccination for Health Care Personnel
www.fda.gov/cber/flu/fluhealthcare.htm