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## Cold and flu prevention

Influenza (the flu) and colds are two of the most common respiratory infections. Highly contagious, the viruses that cause colds and flu are spread via droplets of fluid that are expelled from the body when an infected person sneezes, coughs or speaks. It's nearly impossible to completely avoid these bugs - adults average two to four colds each year and children catch between six and eight.' But if a little extra handwashing can save you a week or more of sniffing, shivering misery, it's time well spent.

### What's the difference?

Because colds and flu cause similar symptoms, it's easy to confuse the two. Many people refer to a bad cold as "the flu," and it can be difficult or even impossible to tell the difference between them based only on symptoms.

Generally, a cold is less intense than the flu, with the symptoms coming on more gradually. Between one and three days after you're exposed to a cold virus, you'll begin to notice symptoms like a runny nose, sneezing, a scratchy throat, coughing and congestion. Fever is common in infants and young children, and smokers usually will experience more severe symptoms than nonsmokers. In the United states, colds account for more visits to the doctor than any other illness or condition. You can expect a cold to last about a week, but it can linger, especially in children, the elderly and those in poor health.

Influenza infections last longer, and severe symptoms come on suddenly. According to the American Lung Association, many people who get the flu say it's "like being hit by a truck." Symptoms include muscle and body aches, chills, headache,

high fever, cough, sore throat and fatigue. Most people recover in two weeks, but others - especially the elderly - can feel fatigued and weak long after other symptoms have disappeared.

### Potential complications

Colds clear up on their own, without medication. But the cold virus can leave you vulnerable to other infections, including sinus infections, ear infections and bronchitis. And if you have chronic lung disease like asthma, chronic bronchitis or emphysema, a cold can cause a flare-up that can last for weeks after you've stopped sneezing.

Seasonal flu can lead to sinusitis, ear infections, dehydration, bacterial pneumonia and a worsening of chronic conditions like congestive heart failure, asthma or diabetes. The flu can cause death in elderly people and those with chronic diseases or weakened immune systems.

## Prevention

It's next to impossible to completely avoid cold or flu viruses, but prevention is simple. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, handwashing is the most important way to prevent the transmission of disease. See the sidebar for information about proper hand-washing.

- Wash your hands after touching someone who is ill or after touching an object they've touched. Wash for 20 seconds using soap and warm water.
- Keep your hands away from your eyes, nose and mouth unless you've washed your hands.
- Clean shared surfaces like telephones, keyboards, steering wheels and doorknobs often.
- Get a flu shot every year.
- Make sleep a priority. Your body's immune system does its best work while you're sleeping. Lack of sleep can reduce the effectiveness of your immune system and make you vulnerable to infection.
- Stay hydrated. Drink plenty of water and avoid alcohol and caffeine, which can be dehydrating.



## Treatment

You can combat much of the discomfort from colds and flu with over-the-counter medications. However, be sure that you know what ingredients are in all the drugs you're taking to avoid taking too much. Also, check with your doctor before taking any medication if you're pregnant, breastfeeding, on another prescription drug or being treated for an ongoing health condition. Antibiotics aren't effective in treating viral infections like a cold or influenza, although your doctor may prescribe them if you develop a secondary infection like sinusitis or pneumonia.

Currently, no antiviral medications are available to treat the common cold, but several have been approved for treating the flu in people who haven't been vaccinated. Get plenty of rest, and don't go back to your normal activity level until you feel up to it.

## Washing your hands like a pro

Ever marvel at the hand washing techniques displayed on various medical dramas? Here's how they do it:

1. Use lots of warm, running water and liquid soap to lather your hands and wrists. Avoid bar soap, which can harbor viruses and bacteria. Scrub for at least 15 seconds
2. Rinse with your hands pointing down so the rinse water doesn't run up your arms .
3. Dry with a disposable paper towel – germs can live for hours on hand towels.
4. Shut off the faucet using the paper towel as a barrier so you don't have to touch the handle.
5. Use a lotion or moisturizing cream to prevent cracks in the skin that can provide entry for germs and bacteria.

