

Flu and Colds

Tips on prevention and feeling better

How can I tell if I have a cold or the flu?

A cold and the flu have many of the same symptoms. But a cold is generally mild, while the flu tends to be more severe.

A cold often starts with feeling tired, sneezing, coughing and having a runny nose. You may not have a fever or you may run a low fever—just 1 or 2 degrees higher than usual. You may also have muscle aches, a scratchy or sore throat, watery eyes and a headache.

The flu starts suddenly and hits hard. You'll probably feel weak and tired, and have a fever, dry cough, a runny nose, chills, muscle aches, severe headache, eye pain and a sore throat. It usually takes longer to get over the flu than over a cold.

What causes colds and the flu?

Viruses. Over 100 different viruses can cause colds. There aren't as many viruses that cause the flu. That's why there's a shot for the flu and not for colds.

What can I do to feel better?

There's no cure for a cold or the flu. Antibiotics don't work against viruses. All you can do to feel better is treat your symptoms while your body fights off the virus (see the box to the right).

Ways to treat your cold/flu symptoms

- Stay home and rest, especially while you have a fever.
- Stop smoking and avoid second-hand smoke, which can make cold symptoms worse.
- Drink plenty of fluids like water, fruit juices and clear soups. Fluids help loosen mucus. Fluids are also important if you have a fever because fever can dry up your body's fluids, which can lead to dehydration.
- Don't drink alcohol.
- Gargle with warm salt water a few times a day to relieve a sore throat. Throat sprays or lozenges may also help relieve the pain.
- Use salt water (saline) nose drops to help loosen mucus and moisten the tender skin in your nose.

Should I take medicine for my cold or the flu?

No medicine can cure a cold or the flu. Medicine can, however, help relieve some of your cold or flu symptoms. Check with your doctor before giving any medicine to children.



What's in over-the-counter cold/flu medicines?

The ingredients listed below are found in many cold/flu medicines. Read labels carefully. If you have questions, talk to your doctor or pharmacist.

- **Analgesics** relieve aches and pains and reduce fever. Examples: acetaminophen, aspirin, ibuprofen, ketoprofen, naproxen. Warning: Children and teenagers shouldn't be given aspirin.
- **Antitussives** tell your brain to stop coughing. Don't take an antitussive if you're coughing up mucus. Example: dextromethorphan.
- **Expectorants** help thin mucus so it can be coughed up more easily. Example: guaifenesin.
- **Oral decongestants** shrink the nasal passages and reduce congestion. Examples: ephedrine, phenylephrine, phenylpropanolamine, pseudoephedrine.

Many cold/flu products are available without a prescription. See the box above for a guide to the common ingredients in these products.

What about prescription medicines for the flu?

Some prescription medicines can help flu symptoms. These medicines may help reduce the severity of symptoms if they are started soon after you begin to get sick.

These medicines come as pills or as an inhaler. The inhaled type may cause

problems for some people with asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

Your best bet, though, is to prevent the flu with good handwashing and by getting a flu shot.

What can I do to keep from catching colds and the flu?

The viruses that cause colds and the flu are spread by hand-to-hand contact and by droplets released in the air from sneezes and coughs. Wash your hands often with soap and warm water, and avoid touching your eyes or nose.

Should I get a flu shot?

It's a very good idea to get a flu shot every year if you fall into any of the groups listed in the box below. People in these groups are more likely to have serious problems from the flu, such as pneumonia.

People who should get a flu shot

- People who live in nursing homes or other long-term care facilities
- Adults and children with chronic heart or lung disease
- Adults and children with diabetes, kidney disease, anemia or immune-system problems including AIDS
- Pregnant women with high-risk conditions
- Children on long-term aspirin therapy
- People over age 50
- Health care workers

If you're interested in getting a flu shot, talk to your doctor. October and November are the best months to get a flu shot.

People who are allergic to eggs shouldn't get flu shots.

Should I call my doctor?

In most cases, you don't need to see your doctor when you have a cold or the flu. However, if you have any of the symptoms in the box to the right, call your doctor.

Call your doctor if you have:

- A cold that lasts for more than 10 days
- Earache or drainage from your ear
- Severe pain in your face or forehead
- Temperature above 102°F
- Shortness of breath
- Hoarseness, sore throat or a cough that won't go away
- Wheezing



The American Academy of Family Physicians Foundation has favorably reviewed this material. Favorable review means that medical information is accurate, but does not imply endorsement of any conclusions presented.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

The American Academy of Family Physicians provides health information on the World Wide Web at familydoctor.org.

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