

New guide to colds and flu

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Colds and flu are among the most common ailments that affect human beings, and yet we have no cure for them. For all the information out there, there's just as much misinformation. So, to prepare for winter sniffles, here's a no-nonsense guide to how to look after yourself - and others - when a virus strikes.



The difference

The first step to dealing with your cold or flu is being able to distinguish between one and the other. Although colds are often dismissed as something minor, they can leave you feeling pretty rotten and you might end up thinking that you have the flu.

If you have a cold, you are likely to have any combination of a runny or blocked nose and sneezing, watery eyes, itching in the nose or throat, tiredness or lack of energy, a dry or wet cough and a headache. Adults are unlikely to have a fever with a cold, but it is possible. Children sometimes develop a fever. Colds usually appear about two to three days after contact, are severe for the first three or four days and can take a week or two to clear up completely.

Flu symptoms, on the other hand, include a sudden fever and chills, bodily aches, exhaustion, congestion, headaches and coughing. A typical bout of the flu lasts for three to seven days, although feeling unwell and exhausted can last for two weeks.

When to see a doctor

In most cases, you don't need to see a doctor if you have a cold or flu. If you are particularly concerned about any of your symptoms or if they don't seem to be going away in a reasonable timeframe, it's better to play it safe than sorry. It's also worth visiting your doctor if any of the mucous from your nose and lungs takes on a greenish tinge, as this can be an indication of a secondary infection that needs to be treated.

If you have a compromised immune system because of another infection, pregnancy or because you are either very old or taking care of someone who is very young, you should visit a doctor to try to control the flu symptoms to avoid any other life-threatening complications that can occur.

How to make yourself feel better

There is a range of over-the-counter medication to treat the symptoms of colds and flu. Just consult your pharmacist for the best treatment for your particular set of symptoms.

You can relieve a stuffy nose with either a decongestant spray or tablet, but don't overuse these as they are quickly habit forming and can result in dry nasal cavities that can lead to a secondary infection.

Sore throats, fevers, aches, pains and chills can all be relieved with the analgesics (painkillers and anti-inflammatories) that you have in your medicine cabinet anyway. These will take away the worst of your symptoms, but a fever is your body's way of fighting the virus, so if your raised temperature isn't causing you too much discomfort and isn't too high, it's sometimes worth just riding out the fever in bed.

Whether you have a dry or mucous cough, your pharmacist will advise on the various medications that will ease the discomfort and help you to breathe more easily. The best way to treat a case of congestion is to steam the sinuses with boiling water and some type of infusion. Don't dissolve any ointment that is solid at room temperature as this can then be inhaled and resolidify. A saline nasal spray is also a good way to help the sinuses to flush out the virus.

Always remember that even if you have alleviated your worst symptoms, you are still infected with a virus and bed rest is the best course of action.

Which one do you starve again?

The old adage to feed a cold and starve a fever actually came from the Canterbury Tales, and originally meant something else altogether. However, over the course of time, the meaning has changed to reflect the "old wives' tale" we know today, and there may even be some truth in it.

Chances are, if you have a high fever, you won't feel much like eating anyway, and a fever can actually impact on the functioning of your digestive enzymes. However, a strategy of starvation is about as outdated as the concept of bleeding for good health. In general, if you feel like eating, eat.

Far more important with a cold or flu is that you take in lots of fluids, although it's a good idea to stay away from dairy and, contrary to what you may think, orange juice, as both result in the production of mucous.

Prevent the spread

Now that you have a viral infection, the kindest thing you can do is prevent it from spreading to others. The best way to do this is to take the bed rest you need. It will help your body to fight the virus and it will prevent you from coming into contact with friends or colleagues when you are at your most infectious.

Unfortunately, your most infectious time starts a day or so before the onset of symptoms, and there's nothing you can do about that. With both a cold and the flu, you are then at your most infectious for about three days, but you can continue to be contagious for up to a week or even longer after the symptoms begin to subside, so try to limit your proximity to or contact with other people until you are truly well.

If you do have to come into contact with people, politely refrain from shaking hands or from sitting too close to anyone. If you are using tissues, don't leave these lying around, but conscientiously throw them away. Make use of waterless handwash or spray-on disinfectant to prevent the spread of germs by touching objects.

During the SARS and swine flu scares in recent years, various medical organisations pointed out that since we touch things and greet people using our hands, it is a bad idea to cough into them as we've always been shown by our mothers and teachers. Instead, they recommend coughing into a bent elbow - a part of the body that's unlikely to come into contact with anyone or anything. Whether you feel comfortable doing so is another matter entirely.

Prevention is better than cure

During the cold and flu season, especially if you are coming into contact with sick people, it's a good idea to help your body to fight infection with a daily dose of Vitamin C. Always wash your hands after coming into contact with people, and if you share an office, try to rely on fresh air rather than recycled air-conditioning, even in the winter months.

The flu vaccine is recommended for anyone in a high risk group, and a good option for any healthy adult, as it teaches your body to fight the most recent mutations of the most common flu viruses of the season. Contrary to what some people believe, the flu vaccine cannot make you ill, as it does not contain a live virus. It can, however, make you feel ill for a couple of days as your body produces antibodies to the flu.

Most medical aids, like Profmed, will cover the cost of a flu vaccine out of the risk benefit.

For more information on Profmed, go to www.profmed.co.za, call +27 (0) 800 334 733 or go to www.facebook.com/profmed.

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