

Colds and flu

Common viral infections

Most infections are caused by viruses and the most common of these are colds, influenza (the flu) and flu-like illness. The common cold is caused by viruses called rhinoviruses and influenza by ones called influenza viruses. Complications can be serious with flu but this is very unlikely with a cold. There are other differences, explained here, and some steps you can take when you have a cold or flu.

How are colds and flu similar?

Colds and the flu can cause symptoms such as sore throat, sneezing, a blocked or runny nose, and dry, tickly or chesty cough. They may both cause tiredness and headache.

How are colds and flu different?

Influenza can be a serious illness that is sometimes fatal. The flu tends to come on strongly and suddenly (peaking in a day or two) whereas a cold may develop over a few days when you might feel 'off colour'. The flu has some symptoms which are less common with a cold, including:

- body (eg, back) and muscle aches
- shivers, chills and sweats
- fever (body temperature over 38°C although fever may not be present in elderly people)
- headache
- exhaustion and weakness (may force you to bed)
- feelings of nausea
- poor appetite, vomiting or diarrhoea.

Influenza can mostly be prevented by annual vaccination, and this is available for both children and adults. There is no vaccine to prevent a cold. The flu vaccine may be altered each year to cover the main flu strains.

Tip: Ask your GP about the annual influenza vaccine. It is free if you are over 65, pregnant or have certain long term health conditions – visit the website www.fightflu.co.nz

General cold symptoms

General cold symptoms should last a few days then start to improve. While you have a cold try to:

- get some rest – this helps speed your recovery
- use saline nasal spray or drops or nasal rinses



- drink plenty of fluids and avoid alcohol – this is important and it helps keep your mucus thin and loose and easier to blow out or cough up
- suck sore throat or cough lozenges or take a teaspoon of honey for a cough. Note: Lozenges may be a choking hazard for young children and honey should not be given to infants under 12 months old
- take a pain relief medicine for headache, pains and fever and note the ingredients if taking any other remedies – it is dangerous to 'double dose' on things like paracetamol or ibuprofen
- ask a pharmacist for advice about products that may help with common lingering symptoms such as nasal congestion or a troublesome cough.

Important: Children under 16 years should not be given aspirin. Most over-the-counter cough and cold remedies should not be used in children under six years.

If your symptoms suddenly become much worse or if your symptoms do not improve in five to seven days, call Healthline free on 0800 611 116 or contact your GP. If the person has other health problems, or is a baby, child or an elderly person you should seek help at any time if you are worried or if they could be dehydrated.

See a doctor or call an ambulance if the person:

- is having difficulty breathing or chest pain
- has blue or purple lips
- is vomiting and unable to keep fluids down
- develops seizures
- has signs of dehydration (dizzy when standing up, lack of urination, thirsty, lethargic)
- is making you worried that something is 'not right'.



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Patient information – Colds and flu



Will antibiotics help me?

Antibiotics only treat bacterial infections. They do not cure cold or influenza viruses, or stop colds or the flu from getting worse. It takes a few days for your own immune system to start tackling these viruses, and within a week or two you should feel better.

Having a viral infection does however make it more likely to get a bacterial infection as well (called a secondary infection). This often affects the lung, sinuses, tonsils or ears. Signs you might have a bacterial infection include:

- mucus becoming thick and green, yellow or bloody
- painful lungs, wheezing or being short of breath
- sore or painful ears, tonsils or sinuses.

If your doctor thinks you might have a serious secondary bacterial infection on top of your viral infection, antibiotics may be prescribed to kill off the bacteria.

What if I have the flu?

If you think you have the flu and become at all worried, phone your doctor. Influenza can lead to complications such as bacterial chest infection or pneumonia and can be much more serious for some people, including:

- older people
- people with long term health problems (eg, cancer, kidney, heart or lung disease including asthma)
- pregnant women
- people who are very overweight (obese).

It is very important to avoid becoming dehydrated while you have the flu, particularly as you may not feel like drinking fluids. The ‘cold relief’ tips above may also help with the flu, particularly pain relief for aches.

Tip: An antiviral drug may shorten the flu but only if taken in the first 48 hours of symptoms – talk to your doctor.

If you have the flu it is important to not infect others, some of whom may suffer severe effects. Aim to stay at home. Cover coughs and sneezes (with the inside of your elbow if needed) and dispose of used tissues in a bin. Wash or sanitise hands with an alcohol gel and keep surfaces and handles at home wiped clean. Let others know that you are unwell so they can look out for you (eg, family, friends or neighbours).

Could it be something else?

It is not easy to tell the symptoms of a bad cold from a mild flu, and some symptoms are also much like those of other infections, some of which can be very serious.

The most urgent one to consider is meningococcal disease, an infection of the blood and/or brain, which first can appear like flu but worsens quickly and can kill. **If you think a person might have this, it is vital to contact a doctor or hospital immediately, day or night.** If treated early with antibiotics, death or disability can be avoided.

Symptoms of meningococcal disease

Older children, teens and adults may

- have a fever and severe headache
- vomit, have diarrhoea or cramps
- be sleepy, confused, delirious or unconscious
- have a stiff neck (can you touch your chin to your chest?)
- dislike bright lights
- have joint pain and aching muscles
- have a rash or spots (anywhere, no matter how small)

A baby or infant may

- have a fever (perhaps also cold hands and feet)
- cry or be irritable, especially when picked up
- have a high-pitched, moaning cry
- refuse drinks or feeds
- vomit
- be sleepy or floppy or harder to wake
- have a stiff neck
- have a bulging fontanelle (top of the head in babies)
- dislike bright lights
- have skin that is pale, blotchy or turning blue
- have a rash or spots (anywhere, no matter how small).

Further information and support

Call Healthline on 0800 611 116 for 24-hour advice, or call your GP. If you visit your GP let the receptionist know in advance if you have flu, or when you arrive.

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