

Flu & Cold

Self-care for adults



Home treatment

When to call your doctor

Getting a flu shot

What causes the flu?

The flu (influenza) is caused by a virus. It can come on quickly and make you feel very sick. You are most at risk for catching the flu during flu season, which is in the late fall and winter. Common symptoms of flu are fever, chills, body aches, headache, tiredness, a dry cough, and sore throat. The flu can last from a few days to a couple of weeks. Some symptoms of the flu, such as a dry cough, can last longer.

What causes a cold?

Colds are also caused by viruses. But they are not the same viruses that cause the flu. Colds are more common and you can catch a cold at any time of year. Some of the symptoms of a cold can be the same as the flu, such as a sore throat, cough, headaches, and body aches. You can feel a cold coming on for a few days before you feel sick. Colds can last one to two weeks. If you have a cold that lasts longer than two weeks, call your doctor. You might have allergies or a sinus infection.

Can a cold or the flu lead to something more serious?

A cold can cause sinus congestion and earaches in some people. The flu can lead to something more serious, such as pneumonia. People with a chronic health condition are at a higher risk for getting a serious illness from the flu. If you have a chronic condition, talk to a member of your health care team about how to take care of yourself so your flu doesn't lead to something more serious.

Can antibiotics help if I have a cold or flu?

Antibiotics only work against bacterial infections. They won't kill the viruses that cause a cold or flu. In fact, taking antibiotics when you don't need them can lead to antibiotic-resistant bacteria. This means that if you get an illness caused by bacteria, antibiotics won't work. This makes it harder to treat the infection.

What can I do to feel better?

Here are some things you can do at home to help you feel better:

For fever:

- Keep the room comfortably cool.
- Wear lightweight clothing.
- Stay hydrated by drinking water and diluted fruit juices.
- Consider a lukewarm sponge bath, but do not use cold water or alcohol.
- Consider giving the appropriate dose (on the label) of a fever-reducing medicine such as acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin). Do not give aspirin to anyone under 19. Review product labels and your own health history before taking.

For cough:

- Drink clear fluids (water, broth), juice, non-caffeinated tea.
- Avoid alcohol, caffeine, and cigarette smoke
- Get rest
- Keep room temperature comfortable and adjust the humidity.
- Gargle with warm salt water several times a day, drink warm lemon water with honey, or use throat lozenges.

For stuffy nose:

- Drink water, juice, tea, or soup.
- Use a clean cool-mist humidifier or steam from a hot shower.
- Use breathing strips (only for ages 5 and above).
- Use saline nasal sprays or saltwater rinses.
- Keep head raised.
- Avoid tobacco smoke.
- Adults may consider using decongestants or antihistamines, but they should not be used in children unless specifically recommended by a doctor.

General information:

- Change positions in bed and try to walk around two or three times a day.
- Consider giving the appropriate dose (on the label) of acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) to relieve headache and body aches. Do not give aspirin to anyone under 19. Review product labels and your own health history before taking.
- Wear lightweight clothing but have light blankets available for chills.
- Eat easily digested soft foods, such as oatmeal, toast, applesauce, and rice. Eat small amounts more frequently.
- Drink lots of water, low-salt broth, chicken soup, real fruit juices (no sugar added), vegetable juices, non-caffeinated teas, hot water mixed with lemon and honey, or frozen ice pops or Jello for children who refuse liquids.
- **Call the doctor immediately if symptoms worsen, or if there is no improvement in symptoms after 3 days.**

What you can do to protect yourself:

- Get a seasonal flu shot.
- Wash your hands often with warm, soapy water.
- Use alcohol-based hand sanitizers frequently to clean your hands.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth. Germs are spread this way.
- Avoid close contact with sick people.

- Stay away from tobacco and wood smoke. Smoke irritates your lungs and causes a dry, hacking cough. If you smoke, quit. People who smoke are more likely to catch a cold and more likely to have a flu develop into a more serious infection, such as pneumonia. If you smoke, or live with someone who does, call the Lahey Health Tobacco Treatment program at 781-744-QUIT (7848) for information about quitting.

**Should I get a flu shot?**

The flu shot can't protect against all flu viruses, but getting a flu shot can help protect against the most common types of flu.

We recommend a flu shot every year for everyone age 6 months and older. People at highest risk for problems from the flu should especially receive a flu shot. This includes people who:

- Are 65 years or older. Live in a nursing home or live in housing with people that have chronic medical conditions.
- Have a chronic illness, such as diabetes, heart disease, kidney failure, cancer, or a lung problem, such as asthma or cystic fibrosis.
- Have an immune disorder or a suppressed immune system caused by taking medicine.
- Will be pregnant during the flu season.