

Treating Colds and Flu

The common cold is the number one reason children stay home from school or visit the doctor. In fact, 22 million school days are missed every year as a result of the common cold alone. Children typically get up to eight colds each year, which last five to seven days.

What Is a Cold?

A cold is an infection of the upper respiratory system (nose, throat, and ears). Colds are caused by viruses. In fact, more than two hundred viruses cause colds. Because so many viruses cause colds, no vaccination, or shot, is available to prevent people from catching colds.

What Is the Flu?

Influenza, or the flu, and colds are very similar. Both are respiratory infections. Like colds, the flu is caused by viruses (but not the same viruses that cause colds). Colds are usually mild, but the flu can be severe and even lead to death. The best way to prevent the flu is by getting a flu vaccination each fall.

How Do People Catch Colds and Flu?

Mucus is the wet, slimy stuff inside the nose. When someone sneezes or coughs, droplets of mucus are sprayed into the air. Breathing in these droplets can spread a cold from one person to another.

People can also catch a cold if they touch their eyes, noses, or mouths after handling something with cold viruses on it. Video games, the doors at the mall, and school desks are all hot spots for viruses. So children and adults should wash their hands often and properly.

What Are the Symptoms of Colds and Flu?

Symptoms are signs or clues that indicate illness. Once someone has come in contact with a cold virus, it usually takes two to three days for cold symptoms to begin.

A person who has some of the following symptoms probably has a cold.

- low fever (100° to 101° Fahrenheit)
- body chills
- itchy or sore throat
- sneezing, runny nose, and watery eyes
- coughing
- feeling tired and not hungry
- congestion (stuffy nose and trouble breathing)



The flu has similar symptoms, but the fever is high, body aches are intense, tiredness is extreme, and people often become sick “all of a sudden.” Because colds and flu share many symptoms, it can be difficult (or even impossible) to tell the difference between them based on symptoms alone.

What Helps Treat Colds and Flu?

Antibiotics do not help treat colds and flu, because colds and flu are caused by viruses. Antibiotics kill bacteria, not viruses. However, there are other things you can do.

Colds

Colds simply have to run their course; medicines don't make colds go away faster. But some medicines can help people feel better until the cold goes away. Pain relievers—such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen—help reduce fever, headaches, and aching muscles. **Never give aspirin to children or teenagers who have cold or flu-like symptoms, particularly fever. Aspirin can cause a rare but serious illness called Reye syndrome.**

Decongestants can help make it easier to breathe by shrinking the swollen lining of the nose. Antihistamines dry up mucus and may help stop runny noses and sneezing.

Other things you can do:

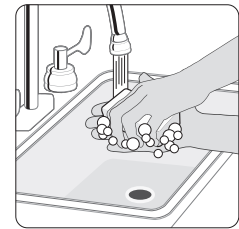
- Keep a sick child home from school and ensure that he or she rests.
- If you are sick, stay home and rest.
- Provide hot drinks to soothe coughs and sore throats. This also helps to clear mucus.
- Run a humidifier (a small, quiet machine that sprays fine cool mist in the air) to relieve scratchy throat, stuffy nose, and itchy eyes. Humidifiers make room air moist, which loosens mucus. (A steamy shower can help if you don't have a humidifier.)
- Wash hands often and properly to avoid spreading the cold virus. Also, don't share cups and eating utensils, such as forks and spoons, with anyone.



Flu

Treating the flu is similar to treating colds.

- Keep a sick child home from school and ensure that he or she gets plenty of rest.
- If you are sick, stay home and rest.
- Provide pain relievers for fever and body aches. (No aspirin for children and teens!)
- Drink lots of liquids (water, chicken broth, and other fluids).
- Offer hot drinks to soothe sore throat.
- Wash hands often and properly to avoid spreading flu virus. Also, don't share cups and eating utensils, such as forks and spoons, with anyone.



Most children and adults get over the flu within two weeks. However, if someone does not get better within a couple of weeks, seek medical care. This may be a sign of infection with another virus or bacteria (called secondary infection), which may lead to complications such as bronchitis and pneumonia.

Seek early medical care for flu if symptoms are severe (very high fever, trouble breathing, confusion, etc.). Your doctor may prescribe antiviral medication to treat flu. Antiviral treatment must be started within two days of becoming ill; the treatment takes five days.

For more information about preventing colds or flu, visit the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Website:

www.cdc.gov/flu/

