Wellness

Cold and flu

Help keep out the cold this winter

Colds and flu are caused by different viruses. A cold can be caused by a range of viruses that affect the nose, throat, sinuses & airways. The flu is so called because of the influenza virus that causes it, and there are many different strains of the flu virus.

Colds and flu are often confused because their symptoms can be similar, such as blocked, runny nose, sneezing, sore throat and coughing. Flu symptoms are often more severe and last longer than a cold, however, and you may also feel achy, nauseous and have chills, fever or diarrhoea.

How can you catch a cold or the flu?

Cold and flu viruses spread person-to-person through breathing in droplets in air, mostly from sneezes and coughs. You can also pick up cold or flu infection by touching infected surfaces such as hands, door handles and other shared surfaces, then touching your nose and mouth. That's why you're more likely to catch a cold or the flu in crowded spaces where viruses spread easily from person-to-person.

What can you do to lessen your chances of catching a cold and the flu?

It can be difficult to prevent catching these illnesses entirely, but good hygiene & healthy habits help.

- wash hands frequently and thoroughly and keep shared items and surfaces clean (e.g. phones, toys, handles, cups)
- hand sanitisers contain alcohol as an antiseptic to kill germs and may be a good option when you're on the go
- regular exercise — as simple as 30 minutes brisk walking daily — can help cut stress levels and boost your infection-fighting ability
- don't smoke and avoid secondhand smoke as it makes your immune system weaker and causes many other health problems
- eat a healthy, balanced diet for energy to fight infection
- get enough sleep — lack of sleep may make you more infection-prone.

Should you get a flu vaccination?

The National Health and Medical Research Council recommends yearly flu vaccination as flu viruses change and create new forms each year so most people won't have immunity. The flu vaccine contains a tiny amount of inactive influenza viruses. You can't get flu infection from it as the virus is not live, but its presence prompts your body to make antibodies, protecting you from certain forms of flu for that year. The best time to get the flu vaccination is in autumn before the expected flu season in winter. Flu vaccination is at least 60% effective in preventing the flu, with immunity developing about 2 weeks after injection and lasting about a year.

For more information about the flu vaccine, and to see whether it is appropriate for you, talk to your doctor or pharmacist.

How can you best treat colds and flu?

There's no known cure for viral cold and flu. Antibiotics generally won't help as they're for bacterial infections. But if you have a cold or the flu, there are simple ways to help you feel better and keep the infection from spreading.

- stay home from work and keep children off school to prevent spreading it to others
- cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze and dispose of tissues appropriately
- stay hydrated with fluids like water or clear soup
- talk to your doctor or a pharmacist about medication that could help to relieve your symptoms.

If you don't feel better after a week or so or if you're short of breath or if you are worried in any way, see your doctor.

Further information

Immunise Australia
www.immunise.health.gov.au

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