How to Beat the Cold or Flu

Expert Reviewed

Three Parts: Treating a Cold or Flu at Home Recognizing When to See Your Doctor Preventing the Spread of Cold and Flu

The common cold and flu are a collection of respiratory viral infections that lead to familiar symptoms, such as congestion, fever, muscle and body aches, sore throat, weakness, and nausea. If you also experience severe cramping and diarrhea (what most people refer to as "stomach flu"), then you actually have a different—but still viral—infection called viral gastroenteritis, which requires a slightly different treatment.^[1] Sadly, there is no cure for these viruses, and you must wait for your immune system to tackle the job of beating them. However, you can still do plenty to help relieve and reduce symptoms during the illness as your immune system does its job.



Treating a Cold or Flu at Home

- Take an over-the-counter (OTC) medication. Both acetaminophen (Tylenol) and ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin) will help bring down your fever. Even bringing your fever down a degree or two will help make you feel a bit better. These medications are also pain relievers, which can help with pain related to sore throat and muscle ache from the cold or flu. [3]
 - Always use acetaminophen or ibuprofen in children. Aspirin can lead to a life-threatening condition called Reye's syndrome.^[4]
- **Take a decongestant.** If your cold or flu includes congestion, then you can also take an OTC decongestant to help. Many OTC fever reducers have cold and flu variants that include additional medicine for cough and congestion. [5] Take as directed and do not combine medicines or take any medicine longer than directed.
 - If you prefer to stay away from a medication, you can also try saline drops and sprays, which are also a better option for young children since they're just salt water. [6] Always use as directed.
- **3** Gargle with warm salt water. An easy, safe way to help soothe a sore throat from a cold or flu is to gargle with warm salt water. Dissolve half a teaspoon in 8 ounces of warm water, hold a small amount of the solution at the back of your throat and gargle for thirty seconds. [7] This is safe to repeat as needed.
 - Never swallow the solution since drinking salt water isn't safe. If using this method with a child, make sure he or she can gargle without choking as well.^[8]
- **Hydrate.** Drinking plenty of water helps for several reasons. Plenty of liquids will help thin the congestion-causing mucus, moisten and soothe your sore throat, and prevent dehydration if your flu symptoms include vomiting.^[9]
 - If you have a "stomach flu" that includes vomiting and diarrhea, stick to water and sports drinks (such as Gatorade) to help replace lost electrolytes.^[10] For young children, use specific fluid and electrolyte replacement options (such as Pedialyte) instead of sports drinks.^[11]
 - For a cold, you can also drink juice and clear broth in addition to the above options.[12]
 - Men should aim for 13 cups of water each day, whereas women should aim to drink nine. [13]
- **Avoid caffeine and alcohol.** You should avoid both caffeine and alcohol while you're sick. These fluids are both diuretics, which means that they can actually make dehydration worse instead of hydrating you.^{[14][15]}
- **6 Get additional rest.** Both the common cold and the flu are caused by viruses. Your immune system will fight off the viruses on its own, but one of the best ways to help your immune system is with lots of rest.^[16] Take time off from school or work to stay home and get additional hours of sleep.

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Take a hot shower. A humid environment can also help to thin and break up mucus, relieving congestion and soothing a sore throat in the process. Take a nice hot shower to take advantage of this natural decongestant option.

- **8 Use a vaporizer or humidifier.** You can also add moisture to the air around you at home by using a vaporizer or humidifier. This will help reduce congestion similar to the way a shower can.^[17] Choose a cool mist setting, and make sure that you clean the apparatus daily since it can potentially breed mold or bacteria that make your symptoms worse.^[18]
- **9** Take OTC throat sprays or cough drops. To help reduce cough and sore throat symptoms, you can also take OTC lozenges or use throat sprays. [19] These products are safe to use in conjunction with other cold and flu medicines, and they can help relieve the sore throat irritation that causes coughing.
- **Avoid smoking and other throat irritants.** In addition to the numerous other health complications due to smoking, it can also worsen and prolong cold symptoms because the smoke will irritate your throat.^[20] In addition to avoiding smoking, you should reduce your exposure to other throat irritants, including secondhand smoke, fumes, air pollution, etc.^[21]

Part 2

Recognizing When to See Your Doctor

- Monitor your fever. Children should see a doctor for a fever of 103°F (39.4°C) or higher. Additionally, adults and children both should see a doctor for any fever lasting longer three days or one that doesn't respond to an OTC fever reducer.
- **2** Monitor your fluid intake. If your "stomach flu" symptoms include severe vomiting and diarrhea that make it hard to keep down even fluids, then you should see a doctor immediately.^[24] Dehydration and the loss of other necessary vitamins and minerals due to vomiting and diarrhea is a serious complication. If necessary, a hospital can take additional steps to help keep you hydrated.
- **2 Look for a bluish color to your child's skin.** If you have a young child suffering from flu symptoms, then keep an eye out for a bluish pallor to the child's skin. [25] This indicates a drop in oxygen levels, which is a sign that the child is having difficulty breathing. Seek immediate medical attention if your child displays this symptom.
- A Note the duration of your sickness. Most people fully recover from a cold or flu within about two weeks. If your symptoms persist without improving (or even get worse) for ten days, then you should see your doctor. This may indicate a different cause to your symptoms, or your doctor may have to prescribe antiviral medications to help your immune system beat the infection.
- Note any trouble breathing. If you have any trouble breathing including laboring to breathe or shrugging shoulders when breathing, signs of wheezing for breath, or shortness of breath, then you should contact your doctor. These symptoms can be an indication that the cold or flu has led to a worse infection such as pneumonia or bronchitis, which will require intervention from your doctor to help you get over the symptoms.
- **Note any severe earaches or ear drainage.** If the cold or flu turns into an actual ear or sinus infection, you may notice an earache or ear drainage. This is a sign of a bacterial rather than a viral infection, which will require a prescription for antibiotics.
- See your doctor if you experience an altered mental state. If you experience any confusion, disorientation, fainting, or other altered mental state, then you should see your doctor. This can be a complication due to high fever, dehydration, or another cause for concern due to your flu symptoms.

Part 3

Preventing the Spread of Cold and Flu

Get a flu vaccine. One of the single best steps you can take to avoid a flu infection is to get an annual flu

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vaccine.^[30] This yearly vaccine will protect you against several different strains that medical experts expect to be prevalent during the coming flu season. You can get a flu vaccine at your doctor's office or even most local pharmacies.

- Unfortunately, flu vaccines don't protect against the common cold, and they don't guarantee protection against all flu strains, but they still significantly reduce your risk of infection.
- **2** Wash your hands often. Frequently washing your hands with warm, soapy water is the best way to kill cold and flu germs.^[31] If you're sick, it'll help you not to spread the virus, and it'll help you avoid contracting the virus if you're not already sick.
- Do not share cups or utensils. Items that directly contact your mouth (such as cups and utensils) are a direct method of transmission for the cold and flu virus. Sharing these items with a sick person is a sure way to contract the illness. If you're sick, avoid sharing them with others as well to decrease their chances of getting sick.
 - For young children, this also means cleaning toys, pacifiers, and similar items often since they regularly end up in the child's mouth.^[32]
- Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze. Coughing and sneezing sends particles of the virus into the air to infect other people. It's one of the leading ways that people contract cold and flu viruses. You should cover your mouth any time you cough or sneeze. Experts advise covering your mouth with your sleeve or your elbow instead of your hands. [33]
 - If you must use your hands, wash them well with warm, soapy water afterward.
- Take vitamin C supplements. Studies have shown that taking vitamin C once you're already sick has a minimal effect on the virus. However, taking vitamin C before the onset of a cold or flu virus may help shorten the duration of your illness. [34] By staying up on your vitamin C requirement, you may help reduce the length of time you're sick.
- **Take an antiviral medication.** If you are healthy but must be around a person with the flu, then you can also take an antiviral medication that decreases your risk of infection. Taken right away, antiviral drugs can reduce your risk between 70 and 90 percent.^[35]
 - These drugs come in the form of pills, liquids, or inhalers and require a prescription. Common options include oseltamivir (Tamiflu), zanamivir (Relenza), amantadine (Symmetrel), and rimantadine (Flumadine). [36]

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Tips

• Even the best prevention methods don't always work. Avoiding contact with others while you're sick will also help avoid the spread of cold and flu viruses.

Warnings

• Do not take any antibiotics for a common cold or flu. As viruses, antibiotics will not work against them, but you can help create resistant infections by taking antibiotics when they aren't necessary.

Sources and Citations

- 1. http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/viral-gastroenteritis/basics/symptoms/con-20019350
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