

# Colds and Flu

**Common colds and the 'flu' (influenza) are viral infections affecting the nose, sinuses, throat and airways. Antibiotics do not work against viral infections. Colds and the flu usually get better on their own. Medicines may relieve some of the symptoms of colds and flu.**

When someone has a cold or the flu, the fluid from their nose, mouth and airways contains the infecting virus. Colds and flu spread when this infected fluid passes to someone-else (e.g. by touch, coughing, sneezing). Colds spread easily, especially between children who spend a lot of time together (e.g. at childcare or school). A cold is most easily spread (infectious) in the first one or two days after symptoms develop.

## Signs and symptoms

Cold symptoms include:

- runny nose
- blocked nose (congestion)
- sore throat
- sneezing
- fever
- feeling tired.
- red, watery eyes
- cough
- headache

Flu (influenza) symptoms are like cold symptoms, but are usually more severe and may also include:

- fever and chills (sweating and shivering)
- aching muscles and joints
- feeling weak
- loss of appetite, nausea and vomiting
- diarrhoea.

Most cold and flu symptoms usually last less than 10 days. A cough may last longer.

## Protection against influenza

A 'flu injection' will give protection against the flu. It is best to have the flu vaccine in autumn each year, as influenza is most common from late autumn to early spring. The flu vaccine is especially recommended for people over 65 years and their carers, adults with certain medical conditions, pregnant women, Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander people aged 15 years and older, health workers and people who provide essential services. Some people are eligible for a free vaccine. Prescription medicines to treat influenza are also available. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

## Self care

- Get plenty of sleep and rest, and stay comfortably warm. A child with the flu should rest and keep warm until their temperature has been normal for 48 hours.
- Drink plenty of fluids to help thin mucus and prevent dehydration. Offer babies water between feeds. Adults and children should drink at least enough water every day to satisfy thirst and keep their urine light-coloured (unless a doctor advises not to).
- Breathe-in steam (e.g. from inhalations, vaporizers, showers, baths) to loosen mucus. Do not give inhalations to young children, as steam can burn.
- Try drinks of honey and lemon in warm water to soothe a sore throat and relieve coughing.
- Blow your nose gently, with one or both nostrils open. Mucus can be removed from a baby's nostrils with a bulb syringe – ask a pharmacist.
- Cover nose-blowing with a tissue. Cover your nose and mouth when coughing and sneezing – use a tissue or the bend of your elbow, not your hand. Turn your head away from food and others. This will help to stop infection spreading.
- Put used tissues in a bin straight away.

- Wash your hands regularly with soap and water, especially before eating or preparing food and after blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing. If you do not have soap and water, use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser.
- Wash children's dummies and toys regularly.
- Keep your hands away from your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Avoid sharing eating and drinking utensils.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and wholegrain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Avoid cigarette smoke – it can make symptoms worse.
- Limit alcohol.

## Medicines

No medicines can cure a common cold, but some non-prescription medicines can help relieve cold and flu symptoms. Some cold, flu and cough medicines should not be used by children, pregnant or breastfeeding women or people with certain medical conditions. Cold, flu and cough medicines can cause side effects and interact (interfere) with other medicines. Always ask a pharmacist or doctor for advice. Check with a pharmacist or doctor before giving medicines to a child. Cold, flu and cough products containing decongestants, cough suppressants, expectorants, mucolytics and antihistamines should not be given to a child younger than six years of age.

Medicines that can help relieve cold and flu symptoms include:

### Decongestants

- Can clear a blocked nose. They are available as syrups, tablets, nose sprays and nose drops.
- Do not use decongestant nose sprays or drops for more than five days in a row.
- A pharmacist can advise on the correct way to use nose sprays and drops.

### Cough suppressants

- Can suppress (stop) the urge to cough and relieve a dry cough.
- Must not be used for a chesty, wet cough that brings up mucus.
- Are not suitable for a cough caused by asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

### Expectorants and Mucolytics

- Can loosen and thin mucus in the nose, sinuses and airways.
- Can help treat a chesty, wet cough that brings up mucus. These medicines can make it easier to cough up mucus.

### Relief of pain and fever

Simple pain relievers (e.g. paracetamol, ibuprofen) can relieve headache, sore throat, body aches and fever.

**Note:** Aspirin should not be given to children under 16 years of age, unless advised by a doctor.

### Some other treatments

- A nose spray containing ipratropium can dry a runny nose.
- Saline (salt water) nose spray, nose drops or sinus rinse can help clear mucus from the nose and sinuses.

## Important

A more serious viral or bacterial infection or other medical condition may develop from a cold or the flu (e.g. an ear infection, sinusitis, asthma, bronchitis, pneumonia). Bacterial infections may need antibiotic treatment.

Seek medical advice if symptoms continue for more than 10 days, or if any of the following symptoms develop:

- high temperature (over 38.5 C) or chills
  - severe headache
  - stiff neck
  - light hurts eyes
  - skin rash, pale or mottled skin
  - unusual drowsiness or confusion
  - ear ache
  - shortness of breath, noisy or fast breathing or difficulty breathing
  - cough lasting longer than 4 weeks
  - yellow, brown, green or blood stained mucus (phlegm)
  - chest pain
  - muscle aches
  - eyes sticky with pus
  - a child refuses food or drinks, is very irritable, has a strange high-pitched cry or has a bulging fontanelle (soft spot on top of head).
- Medicated inhalations (e.g. menthol, eucalyptus) may help clear a blocked nose.
  - Sucking on lozenges may relieve a sore throat and coughing. Do not give lozenges to a young child.
  - Gargles can relieve a sore throat. Do not give a gargle to a young child.

## For more information

### Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthdirect.org.au](http://www.healthdirect.org.au)

### Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### NPS Medicine Wise

#### Medicines Information Line

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

***Pharmacists are medicines experts.  
Ask a pharmacist for advice when  
choosing a medicine.***

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- » *Hayfever*
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- » *Medicines and Driving (electronic only – ask your pharmacist)*
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