

# Colds and flu

## ABOUT COLDS AND FLU

A cold is caused by a virus that affects the nose, throat and upper airways. There are more than 200 different viruses that can cause a cold. The flu (influenza) is caused by more severe viruses. The rapid changes in viruses also result in different types of seasonal flu.

Adults usually have three to four colds each year. Children usually have more colds than adults, especially if they are in regular contact with other children (childcare, school). While a cold can make you feel miserable, most cases will clear up in a week. Flu tends to happen more over the winter months, with quicker onset and more severe symptoms.

## WHAT CAUSES A COLD OR FLU?

Both are caused by viruses. When someone with a cold or flu coughs or sneezes, tiny droplets that can contain a cold or flu virus are expelled. These tiny droplets can spread the virus from person to person.

A virus can also be spread by close contact, such as shaking hands or kissing someone who has a cold.

Colds and flu are more common in winter when people spend more time indoors with each other, which increases the chances of infection.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

A cold can cause a blocked or runny nose, red watery eyes, a sore throat, coughing, sneezing and feeling generally tired and unwell. Less common symptoms include nausea and vomiting, headaches, swollen lymph nodes (glands), fever and a husky or hoarse-sounding voice.

While it can be difficult to tell flu from a cold, flu symptoms usually come on more quickly and you

are more likely to have a higher fever, tiredness, headaches, muscle aches and pains, a cough, shivering and hot and cold sensations.

Flu is unlikely to cause serious illness in healthy people. People most at risk of serious illness are those who suffer from other chronic illness, have lowered immunity (from medications or illnesses), pregnant women, the very young, the elderly and those with respiratory diseases.

Poor health and smoking cigarettes will make infections more likely and can make symptoms more severe.

## TREATMENT

Medical and nursing staff will examine you to ensure you do not have a serious illness. The priorities of treatment are to ensure you have enough rest, drink enough fluid and take pain relief, if needed, to ease the symptoms. Your cold should clear up within a week and is best treated at home.

Colds and flu are caused by viruses. Antibiotics **do not** work to cure them.

In some cases, antiviral medicines may slightly reduce the symptoms and duration of the flu. Your doctor will assess if this is appropriate.

## HOME CARE

Your body's immune system will be able to fight the virus, and this can be helped in a number of ways:

- Have plenty of sleep and rest. Stay home from work or study and away from others while you have a cold or flu.
- Take simple pain relief such as paracetamol or ibuprofen to help relieve headaches, muscle

aches and pains and fever. Follow the directions provided on the bottle or box.

- Keep hydrated (drink plenty of fluids). This will help keep your throat moist and replace fluid lost due to a fever and sweating. Plenty of water is best. Avoid alcohol – it will make you more dehydrated.
- Eat soft food. If you have a sore throat, soft foods are easier to swallow. Foods such as chicken soup may help a sore throat and reduce mucus (sticky fluid).
- Use nasal drops or spray. This may help to clear a blocked nose in the short term (two to three days). Ask your healthcare professional what is best for you.
- Use gargles and cough lozenges. These can help soothe a sore throat.

## WHAT TO EXPECT

- Your cold is likely to last a few days but may last up to 10 days. A cough may linger for three weeks.
- The flu can last 10–14 days. In some cases, your doctor may prescribe an antiviral medication, such as oseltamivir (Tamiflu).
- Sometimes colds and flu can trigger underlying lung disease (such as asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (emphysema)).
- Sometimes a cold can lead to a chest infection (caused by bacteria), which may require antibiotics.

You should see your doctor, visit an emergency department or urgent care centre if you become short of breath while doing your usual activities. When you arrive, you may be asked to wear a mask or wait in an area where you are less likely to spread the infection.

## PREVENTION

- Wash your hands every time you touch a tissue, sneeze or cough into your hand. Throw tissues away once you have used them.
- A flu vaccine is available and recommended for all adults and children, especially high risk groups such as the very young, people over 65 years, those with chronic conditions, pregnant women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.
- There is no evidence that vitamins prevent colds.
- Regular exercise, a balanced diet and adequate sleep will help keep your immune system strong.

### Seeking help

In a medical emergency call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

For other medical problems or any concerns see your local doctor or healthcare professional.

For health advice from a registered nurse you can call NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day on 1300 60 60 24 for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.\*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to interpreting services for callers not confident with English.

\* Calls from mobiles may be charged at a higher rate.

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional.
- Visit the Better Health Channel at [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au).

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Authorised and published by the Victorian Government, 1 Treasury Place, Melbourne.

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ISBN 978-1-76069-818-8 (pdf/online/MS word)



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