



# your health & well-being

## What to Do for Colds and Flu: A Winter Q&A

### Is it a cold or the flu? Know the difference

Although the flu and the common cold are both respiratory illnesses, they are caused by different viruses.

### Common cold symptoms include:

- Sore throat
- Stuffy nose
- Runny nose
- Cough
- Mild fever

The flu often causes higher fever, chills, body ache, and fatigue. Generally, cold symptoms are much milder than flu.

If you feel like you have a cold all the time, or if cold symptoms last more than two weeks, you may have allergies or sinusitis. Call your doctor.

### What can I do to treat a cold?

Despite all the ads you see and the array of products that fill the shelves at the pharmacy, there is no true cure for a cold – but good home treatment can help you feel better.

### When you get a cold:

- Get extra rest, and slow down a little from your usual routine. You don't need to stay in bed, but try not to expose others to your cold.
- Drink plenty of fluids. Hot water, herbal tea, or chicken soup will help relieve a stuffy nose and head.
- Take aspirin, ibuprofen (such as Advil or Motrin), or acetaminophen (such as Tylenol) to relieve aches.  
**Note:** Do not give aspirin to anyone younger than 20. It has been linked to Reye's syndrome, a serious illness.
- Use a humidifier in your bedroom and take hot showers to relieve a stuffy nose and head.
- If you have a sore throat or feel mucus in the back of your throat (postnasal drip), gargle with warm salt water. This will help make your throat feel better.
- Use paper tissues, not handkerchiefs. This will help keep your cold from spreading.
- If your nose does get red and raw, put a dab of petroleum jelly on the sore area.
- Chicken soup is comforting, plus the steam helps break up nasal congestion.
- A hot toddy may help you sleep, but beware of mixing alcohol with other cold remedies.

Antibiotics will **not** cure a cold.

### How can I avoid catching a cold?

**WASH YOUR HANDS!** Both flu and cold viruses are transmitted the same way – through microscopic droplets from an infected person's respiratory system. When someone sneezes or coughs, droplets are sprayed onto any nearby surface – including you. If people cough or sneeze into their hands (without a tissue), they can contaminate every surface they touch. If you touch that same surface, you pick up the virus. If you rub your eyes or nose, you've just infected yourself.

### To protect yourself and prevent spread of cold and flu viruses:

- Wash your hands frequently. Use an alcohol-based gel if you don't have access to water.
- Cough and sneeze into a tissue or into your hands. And be sure to wash your hands afterward.
- No tissue? When you cough, turn your head away from others.
- If you have a sudden sneeze, bend your arm and sneeze into it.
- Don't touch your eyes, nose, or mouth.
- Wash any shared surfaces (like phones and keyboards) frequently. Viruses can live on surfaces for several hours.
- Stay away from crowds during cold and flu season.

### When should I go to the doctor or get an antibiotic?

You don't usually need a doctor or an antibiotic when you have a cold. Colds are caused by viruses, and antibiotics kill bacteria, not viruses.

- If your sinuses become blocked and cannot drain properly, you can develop inflammation and a bacterial infection. Symptoms of a sinus infection include a runny or stuffy nose, facial pain, pressure, and headache.
- An ear infection may also result from a bout with a cold. Symptoms of an ear infection include ear pain, fever, and/or a feeling of fullness in the ears.

Although sinus and ear infections can improve on their own, you may need antibiotics to clear the bacterial infections from your body.

### Should I stay at home if I have a cold?

You're contagious for the first few days of your cold, so it's best to stay home then. You need to be careful about coughing and sneezing around other people. Also, you will recover quicker if you get some extra rest.

Sources: *Healthwise*® and *WebMD*®



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it's time to feel better



### **How effective are natural remedies like zinc, echinacea, and vitamin C?**

- Some studies show that zinc nasal sprays help cut a cold's severity and duration. The theory? Zinc sprays may coat the cold virus and prevent it from attaching to nasal cells where they enter the body. But other studies show that zinc is no more effective than placebo.
- Recent, well-done studies on echinacea show that it is not effective in preventing colds. However, in one study, 120 people with cold-like symptoms took 20 drops of echinacea every two hours for 10 days and had briefer colds than others.
- Vitamin C: a recent survey of 65 years' worth of studies found limited benefit, and no evidence that vitamin C prevents colds. However, one large study found that people who took a vitamin C megadose – 8 grams on the first day of a cold – shortened the length of their colds.

Source: WebMD®



### **october tip of the month**

#### **Is it a cold or an allergy?**

If you are sniffing, but not achy or feverish, you may have allergies. Also, if your symptoms last longer than two weeks, and you also have red, itchy eyes, the evidence points to allergies. However, it's often hard to tell because people with allergies and asthma are more likely to get colds. They may already have inflamed and irritated lungs - so they are less able to fight off a cold virus.

#### **Can you catch a cold from getting chilled?**

This is a persistent myth about colds. The only way to catch a cold is by being exposed to a cold virus. Cold air may irritate an existing condition, such as asthma, which would weaken your immunity. This could make your body more receptive to a cold virus, but only if you come in contact with it. If you've caught a cold after getting chilled, it's only coincidence.

### **On myCIGNA.com this month**

#### **Cold and flu season – help is just a call away**

Are you up in the middle of the night with a sick child? Wondering if you or your child has "just a cold", or something more serious? Remember that the 24-hour Health Information Line is available for you at any time. All you have to do is call the number on your CIGNA ID card to speak to a registered nurse about any health question or concern.

You can also listen to audio tapes from a library of health topics.



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