

Colds and flu

Emergency Department factsheets



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.

Adults usually have three to four colds each year. Children usually have more, as their immune systems are not as strong. While a cold can make you feel miserable, most cases will clear up in a week.

What causes a cold or flu?

When someone with a cold or flu coughs or sneezes, they expel tiny droplets that can contain a cold or flu virus. 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 as people spend more time indoors with each other, which increases the chances of infection.

What are the symptoms?

A common cold can cause a blocked or runny nose, red watery eyes, and a sore throat, coughing, sneezing and feeling generally unwell.

Uncommon symptoms include nausea and vomiting, headaches, swollen lymph nodes (glands), fever and a husky or hoarse-sounding voice.

With the flu, the symptoms come on more quickly and there is a fever, tiredness, headaches, muscle aches/pains, cough, shivering and feeling hot and cold. The nose is not as runny. 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), 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 have no serious illness. Your cold should clear up within a week, and is best treated at home.

Home care

A virus cannot be treated with antibiotics. Your body's immune system will be able to fight the virus and can be helped in a number of ways.

- **Rest:** 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 painkillers** such as paracetamol, to help relieve headaches, muscles aches and pains and fever. Check the packet or bottle for the right dose.
- **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, however juice and cordial are fine to drink in small quantities. Avoid tea, coffee and alcohol as they will make you more dehydrated.
- **Eat soft food:** Soft foods are easier to swallow. Foods such as chicken soup may help a sore throat and reduce mucous (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 health care professional what is best for you.
- **Use gargles and cough lozenges:** These can help soothe a sore throat.

- Do not give aspirin to children, unless advised by your doctor.
- Inhale steam: This may help a blocked nose. Put boiled water in a bowl with menthol, camphor or friar's balsam, then put a towel over your head and breathe in the steam through your nose and out through your mouth. Eucalyptus, tea tree oil, peppermint or inhalants may help to ease a stuffy head. Take care not to burn yourself. Do not use with children.

What to expect

- Your cold is likely to last a few days but may last up to ten days. A cough may linger for three weeks.
- The flu can last ten to 14 days.
- Sometimes colds and flu can trigger asthma (in those with asthma).
- Sometimes a cold can lead to a bacterial infection. If this happens you may need antibiotics.

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 but is not needed by most healthy adults. The vaccine may help elderly people and those with existing health problems. High risk groups, such as childcare workers and health professionals, should be immunised each year.
- There is no evidence that vitamins prevent colds. Do not give children vitamins unless advised by a doctor or health care professional.
- Regular exercise, a balanced diet and adequate sleep will help keep your immune system strong.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

For other medical problems see your local doctor or health-care professional.

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider

Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for you.

The design and general content of this factsheet are reproduced with the permission of the Victorian Minister for Health, from factsheets that are Copyright © the State of Victoria. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.