

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 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.

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 cold can cause a blocked or runny nose, red watery eyes, a sore throat, coughing, sneezing and feeling generally tired and 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 you may have a fever, tiredness, headaches, muscle aches/pains, cough, shivering and feeling hot and cold.

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 this 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. Avoid tea, coffee and alcohol as they 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 mucous (sticky fluid).
- **Take vitamins** – Vitamin C and Echinacea have proven benefits in helping to beat a cold. Talk to your doctor or health care professional before giving your child vitamins.
- **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.
- **Avoid other remedies** – Cough mixtures, aspirin and cold and flu remedies are of no clear benefit. **Do not give aspirin to children**, unless advised by your doctor.

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 people with asthma).
- Sometimes a cold can lead to a bacterial infection. If this happens you may need antibiotics.

You should see your doctor or return to the emergency department if you become short of breath while doing your usual activities.

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.

Notes:

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.



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. Call **1300 60 60 24**.

*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate



Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional.
- Visit the **Better Health Channel**
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

If you would like to receive this publication in an **accessible format**, please phone 9096 0578 or email edfactsheets@health.vic.gov.au



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