



# Colds and Flu



**Common colds and the ‘flu’ (influenza) are viral infections affecting the nose, sinuses, throat and airways. Antibiotics are not effective against these viral infections, but colds and the flu usually get better on their own. The uncomfortable symptoms of colds and flu can be relieved with medicines.**

When someone has a cold or flu, secretions from their nose, mouth and airways contain 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 contagious in the first one or two days after symptoms develop.

## Signs and symptoms

Cold symptoms include:

- Runny or blocked nose (congestion)
- Sore throat
- Red, watery eyes
- Sneezing
- Coughing
- Mild fever
- Headache
- Tiredness.

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

- High fevers and shivering attacks
- Aching muscles and joints
- Weakness and lethargy
- Loss of appetite, nausea and vomiting.

Cold and flu symptoms usually disappear within 10 days, although a cough may last longer.

## Protection against influenza

A ‘flu injection’ will give protection against the current flu strain and annual vaccination, before the flu season starts, is recommended for all adults over 65 years and others at a higher risk of getting influenza. Prescription medicines to treat influenza are also available.

## 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 should drink at least 2 litres (8 glasses) of water daily (unless fluid intake has been restricted by a doctor).
- Breathe in steam (e.g., from inhalations, vaporizers, showers, baths) to loosen mucus. Avoid inhalations for young children, as steam can burn.
- Blow 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, coughing and sneezing with a tissue and dispose of used tissues carefully.
- Wash hands with soap regularly, especially before cooking or eating. Wash children’s dummies and toys.
- Avoid sharing eating and drinking utensils.
- Eat a healthy, balanced diet.
- Don’t smoke – it makes symptoms worse.

## 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 usually need antibiotic treatment.

Consult a doctor if symptoms persist for more than seven to 10 days or if any of the following symptoms develop:

- High temperature (over 38.50 C)
- Convulsions
- Severe headache
- Stiff neck
- Rash
- Difficulty waking up or unusual drowsiness
- Ear ache
- Wheezing or shortness of breath
- Persistent coughing
- Yellow, brown, green or blood stained mucus
- Eyes are sticky with pus
- A child refuses feeds or fluids, is excessively irritable or has a strange high pitched cry.

## Medicines

A variety of non-prescription medicines can help relieve cold and flu symptoms. Some are not suitable for young children, pregnant women or people with diabetes, glaucoma, high blood pressure, heart or prostate problems. Some can interfere with other medicines. Always ask a pharmacist for advice.

Medicines that can help relieve cold and flu symptoms include:

### Decongestants

- Relieve nasal congestion. They are available as syrups, tablets, nasal sprays and drops.
- Nasal sprays and drops should not be used for more than five days in a row.
- Should not be given to young children.

### Antihistamines

- Can help reduce runny nose, sneezing and allergy symptoms.
- Are not usually helpful on their own for cold symptoms. Some products contain both a decongestant and an antihistamine.
- Should not be given to young children.

### Cough suppressants

- May relieve a dry unproductive cough.
- Should not be used for a productive 'chesty' cough.
- Should not be given to young children.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

## Expectorants

- Help loosen and thin mucus (phlegm) in the chest.

## Relief of pain and fever

Simple pain relievers (e.g., paracetamol, ibuprofen) can relieve aches and pains, reduce fever and give relief from shivering attacks.

**Note:** Aspirin should not be given to children under 18 years of age.

## Other treatments

- Saline (salt water) nose sprays and drops help thin mucus in the nose and sinuses.
- Medicated inhalations (e.g., menthol, eucalyptus can help clear nasal congestion). Avoid in young children.
- Sucking on lozenges can help relieve sore throats and coughing. (Avoid in young children).

**Note:** There is very little scientific evidence that herbal or vitamin products help prevent or treat colds and flu.

## Related fact cards

- *Antibiotics*
- *Complementary Medicines*
- *Coughs*
- *Ear Problems*
- *Headache*
- *Medicines & Driving (website only, ask your pharmacist)*
- *Pain Relievers*
- *Sinus Problems*
- *Vitamins*

## For more information

**'Common colds need common sense'** – website [www.gottacold.com](http://www.gottacold.com)

**InFLUenza** – website [www.fightflu.com.au](http://www.fightflu.com.au)

**Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)** leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

**NPS Medicines Line** – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

**The Poisons Information Centre** – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

**Pharmacy Self Care Support** – phone 1300 369 772 and ask for the Pharmacy Self Care Field Officer.

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

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