

# Prevention is the Best Medicine

*If you take the right steps, you CAN fend off cold and flu germs this winter*

**T**HE COMMON COLD AND the flu are both respiratory illnesses caused by different viruses. Because these two types of illnesses have similar symptoms, it can be difficult to tell the difference between them.

Influenza is generally a miserable affair—and it's very contagious. People with compromised immune systems are at risk for flu complications such as pneumonia, which *can* be very serious. Generally, most colds clear up in about a week, but can linger long enough to cause a secondary infection such as sinusitis, bronchitis, or ear infection.

## Build Your Immune System

Each flu season is unique, but on average it is estimated that 10 to 20 percent of U.S. residents get the flu each year, while 114,000 are hospitalized for flu-related complications. About 36,000 Americans die on average per year from the complications of flu. Because of these statistics, we offer the following tips to help you

build your immune system, which is the best way to ward off the flu, as well as the common cold.

- **Get a flu shot.** Normally, this is recommended for just about everyone. However, under this year's criteria, the flu shot will be given only to high risk, priority groups. (See "Who Should Get a Flu Shot" below.)
- **Eat at least five servings a day of fruits and vegetables.** They have nutrients essential to immunity. Also include nuts and seeds for their natural vitamin E, whole grains, and adequate protein. Avoid skipping meals.
- **Keep your sugar intake down.** Sugar can weaken your immune system.
- **Restrict alcohol consumption.**
- **Drink about eight 8-oz. glasses of water every day.**
- **Wash your hands frequently** to rid them of viruses. Wash for 25 seconds with warm water and soapy lather, rinse thoroughly, and dry well.
- **Take a daily multivitamin/mineral**

**supplement** (without iron for most people over 50).

- **Consider taking extra vitamin C** (250 to 500 mg a day).
- **Get at least 30 minutes of exercise** most days of the week. Moderate, nonstop exercise 3 to 5 times weekly helps build long-term immune power by increasing blood cells that defend against viruses (and tumors).
- **Get enough restful sleep.** Most people need 7 to 8 hours of sound sleep every day to revitalize immunity.
- **Get off tobacco.** Smokers are susceptible to frequent colds and flu viruses.
- **Learn how to control stress.** Things like brisk exercise, yoga, and meditation can all help.
- **If you feel like you're coming down with something,** cut back to eating mostly fruits and vegetables. Slow down and rest.

## Who Should Get a Flu Shot

When adequate vaccine is available, anyone who wants to avoid the flu and would rather *not* be sick in bed for one to two weeks, should get a flu shot. This year, the vaccine is recommended only for the following priority groups:

- All children six to 23 months of age;
- Adults age 65 years and older;
- Persons aged 2-64 years with underlying chronic medical conditions;
- All women who will be pregnant during influenza season;
- Residents of nursing homes and long-term care facilities;
- Children 6 months to 18 years of age

### Cold or Flu?

Because colds and flu have similar symptoms, the following chart may help you distinguish between the two:



#### SYMPTOMS

Onset

Fever

Chills

Aches, pains

Headache

Fatigue

Runny Nose

Sore Throat

Cough

#### COLD

Gradual, mild

None or mild

Only with fever

Mild

Slight, if any

Mild

Common

Occurs early, lasts 1-2 days

Moderate, if any

#### FLU

Sudden, severe

102° F or higher

Common

Often intense

Prominent

Extreme

Occasional

Common, worse by day 2 or 3

Sometimes severe



on chronic aspirin therapy;

- Healthcare workers with direct patient care; and
- Out-of-home caregivers and household contacts of children aged less than 6 months.

Flu shots are safe for children—and for women who will be more than three months pregnant during flu season. But people allergic to eggs should talk to their doctor about the safety of the vaccine, because flu vaccine viruses are grown in hens' eggs. In addition, anyone who previously had onset of Guillain-Barre syndrome during the six weeks after receiving a flu shot should not get the vaccine before talking with their doctor.

Remember that it's **impossible** to get the flu from the flu vaccine because it contains an inactive or "dead" virus.

Reactions to the vaccine's ingredients—a headache or low-grade fever—usually go away within a few days.

The flu shot prevents 70 to 90 percent of influenza cases. A new flu vaccine is given every year because the flu virus changes year to year and immunity from a flu shot only lasts six months to a year. In the U.S., October through November is the best time to get a flu shot, but it's not too late in December. Your immunity should peak during the height of flu season (December through March), and it takes about two weeks to build up the necessary immunity after a shot.

### Prevent the Spread of Illness

It is especially important this year to follow steps that help prevent the spread of respiratory illnesses like colds and flu.

The basics are:

- **Avoid close contact** with people who are sick.
- **Cover your mouth and nose** with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. Better yet, cough or sneeze **ONLY** into your sleeve, at the bend of your elbow. (Nurses and doctors are taught this technique.) It prevents germs from getting on your hands and being transferred to other surfaces where they can survive for several days!
- **Wash your hands** often.
- **Avoid touching** your eyes, nose, or mouth.

### Tips for Feeling Better

Before running to the drug store when you get a cold or the flu, check out your kitchen. You'll find low-tech, low-cost remedies that are effective, have few side effects, and are doctor-approved!

- **Salt water gargle.** Sooth a sore throat with a half-teaspoon of table salt in a cup of warm water. It reduces the swelling and provides pain relief.
- **Tea made with Echinacea, lemon, and honey.** This soothing drink will coat your throat, reducing soreness and cough. Peppermint tea also helps ease cough and fever.

- **Chicken soup.** Studies have shown that homemade chicken soup may inhibit white blood cells from invading airways, the cause of inflammation and phlegm production with colds and flu.

- **Humidity.** Dry air irritates throat and nasal passages. Put a pan of water on the stove and let it evaporate, or take a warm, steamy shower to humidify the airways in your nose and throat.

You can try ibuprofen, naproxen, or acetaminophen for fever and pain, or a cough suppressant to relieve a dry, unproductive cough. Getting a lot of rest is also essential to your recovery. If you have trouble sleeping, try elevating your head to promote drainage and to help reduce coughing.

### When to Seek Medical Care

If you think you have the flu, schedule an appointment with your doctor promptly. He or she can prescribe drugs that fight the flu virus, but they'll only help if you take them within 48 hours after onset of symptoms. Your doctor can also determine if you really have the flu or if your symptoms indicate one of several other illnesses—such as viral bronchitis or rhinovirus infections (colds) that make the rounds every winter. Seek medical care if you have:

- A temperature of 102° F or higher for more than 48 hours,
- Thick, yellow-greenish nasal discharge or phlegm,
- Difficulty breathing, or congestion or coughing beyond 10 days, or
- Pain in your ear, face, glands, or chest.

If you want to fend off colds and the flu, get a flu shot if recommended, eat nutritious foods, pay close attention to your possible symptoms, and get the exercise and rest you need to make for a healthy winter season! ♦