

Colds and Flu

Overview

The best way to prevent colds is frequent hand washing and avoiding people who are already ill.

More than 200 types of viruses can cause the common cold. The flu (influenza) is caused by the influenza virus, which occurs mainly in the winter. Colds can occur at any time.

The viruses that cause colds and flu may be spread from one person to another. Unlike colds, the flu can cause more serious complications, such as pneumonia.

The best way to protect yourself from the flu is to get a flu shot every year. The flu vaccine protects you throughout flu season, which usually lasts from October through April. Your vaccine is only effective in the year you get it since the flu virus changes each year.

Although the flu vaccine is your best protection from the flu, it is still possible to get a cold or flu-like illness after being vaccinated.

Causes and Risk Factors

Causes

Colds and the flu are caused by viruses that are passed from person to person. They can be spread in the following ways.

Touching an infected person. People carry the cold or flu virus on their hands. If that person shakes your hand and you then touch your eyes, nose, or mouth, you may become infected.

Touching contaminated surfaces. Some viruses live on shared surfaces like telephones and door handles. If you touch a contaminated surface and then touch your eyes, nose, or mouth, you may become infected.

Breathing in the virus. Flu viruses spread through droplets when people cough or sneeze.

Becoming chilled or cold cannot cause a cold or the flu.

Risk Factors

Some people are at higher risk for getting the flu. They include:

- Health care workers
- People with weakened immune systems
- Young children
- Older adults

Cold Symptoms

Cold symptoms begin about 1 to 3 days after you are exposed to a cold virus. Symptoms include:

- Sore throat
- Nasal stuffiness or congestion
- Runny nose
- Mucus that runs down the back of your throat (postnasal drip)
- Frequent sneezing

You may have additional cold symptoms, such as:

- Cough
- Muscle aches
- Eye irritation
- Low-grade fever
- Chills

Usually, a cold lasts 3 to 7 days, but it may persist for as long as 2 weeks. If you smoke or have other chronic health conditions, your symptoms may be worse or last longer.

There is no special test for the common cold. We diagnose the common cold based on your symptoms.

Flu Symptoms

Flu symptoms appear suddenly and include:

- High fever
- Headache
- Dry cough
- Muscle pains
- Diarrhea and vomiting, especially in children

Symptoms usually improve within 2 to 5 days but can last for 1 week or longer. You may continue to feel weak for several weeks.

We often diagnose the flu on the basis of your symptoms, if many people have already been diagnosed during a flu outbreak. We may confirm the diagnosis by testing a sample of mucus from your nose. This test is more likely done if you are sick outside of the flu season.

The flu is more serious than a cold, even for healthy people. Flu complications, such as pneumonia, can require hospital treatment. In rare cases, the flu can cause death.

Those most at risk for complications include:

- Infants and young children
- Pregnant women
- Older adults
- People with a chronic illness such as cancer or lung disease

Prevention

To prevent a cold and the flu:

- Get a flu shot.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth, which is where cold and flu viruses enter your body.

Wash your hands regularly and thoroughly with soap and warm water, or use an alcohol-based hand gel.

Other possible preventive measures include:

- **Physical activity.** Walk for at least 30 minutes every day.
- **Vitamin C** (500 mg daily) helps you prevent colds or feel better more quickly if you have one.
- **Echinacea** may help you feel better sooner, although research shows no benefit.

Adults can spread the flu for up to 5 days after symptoms start. Children may be contagious for longer. If you do get a cold or the flu, avoid spreading it by:

- Covering your mouth and nose with your elbow when you cough or sneeze.
- Washing your hands thoroughly.
- Staying home from school, work, and public places especially if you have a fever. Don't go back until you have had a normal temperature for 24 hours without using fever-reducing medicine.

Flu Vaccine

The best way to avoid the flu is by getting a flu shot every year. Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) strongly recommend everyone older than 6 months get a flu vaccine.

The vaccine comes in 2 forms:

- The flu shot (injection)
- Nasal spray (FluMist)

Both are safe, highly effective at preventing the flu, and won't give you the flu.

The flu shot is safe for:

- Adults
- Children older than 6 months
- Pregnant women
- People with chronic conditions like asthma, diabetes, and heart disease

The nasal spray is safe and effective for healthy people between the ages of 2 and 49. We don't recommend the nasal spray for people who:

- Are younger than 2 or older than 49.
- Are pregnant.
- Have a chronic condition or weakened immune system.

If you are allergic to eggs, we may recommend a vaccine that does not contain egg proteins.

The flu vaccine is available September through March and is free to all Kaiser Permanente members:

- Visit kp.org/mydoctor/flu to find locations and hours.
- Call the flu shot hotline at 1-800-573-5811 (1-800-KP-FLU-11).

Home Treatment

For colds, the best treatment is home care. For flu, home treatment is often effective, but sometimes additional medication is needed. For cold and flu, home remedies and over-the-counter medications can reduce symptoms while the virus runs its course. Try to:

- **Rest.** Return to work or school only after symptoms improve. If you had a fever, stay home until you have been without the fever for 24 hours (without taking fever-reducing medicine).
- **Drink plenty of noncaffeinated fluids.** Try hot herbal tea, warm water, and chicken soup, to reduce congestion.
- **Take over-the-counter medication to soothe symptoms.** Use caution. When using cold medication, read the ingredients. Do not take additional acetaminophen if it is already listed in the cold medication ingredients. You could take too much. Do not give aspirin to anyone younger than 20 years old. Do not give any cough or cold medicines to children under 4 years old.
- **Stop smoking.** If you smoke, you're more likely to catch colds and take longer to recover. Talk to us about quitting. We have many strategies and resources to help you quit.
- **Use a warm humidifier or steam** from a hot shower to reduce symptoms.
- **Try saline nasal sprays** to relieve nasal congestion.

Medications

Antivirals

Antiviral medicines fight viruses. However, there are no antiviral medicines for colds.

We may prescribe an antiviral medicine for the flu. Antivirals work best when taken within the first 48 hours. They may work up to 96 hours after diagnosis. They may shorten your illness and lessen the severity of symptoms.

Antivirals have side effects. Your doctor will talk to you about the risks and benefits.

Antibiotics

Antibiotics are drugs that fight bacterial infections. They are not effective for treating colds and flu, which are caused by viruses.

If you take antibiotics when you don't need them, bacteria can become resistant to antibiotics in the future.

Yellow or green mucus is common with a cold. It does not mean that you need antibiotics.

Flu during Pregnancy

Pregnant women have a greater chance of developing complications from flu. Watch for flu symptoms, such as:

- Fever
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Body aches
- Headache
- Chills
- Fatigue

If you have flu symptoms and are pregnant, call us.

We may recommend antivirals within the first 48 hours to make you feel better faster. They can also prevent complications.

Additional References:

Pneumonia
Protect Your Family from Colds and Flu
Quitting Tobacco
Caring for Your Child's Cold

Related Health Tools:

Interactive Programs

Cold and Flu

Videos

Sinus Rinse
Real Talk about the Flu Vaccine

If you have an emergency medical condition, call 911 or go to the nearest hospital. An emergency medical condition is any of the following: (1) a medical condition that manifests itself by acute symptoms of sufficient severity (including severe pain) such that you could reasonably expect the absence of immediate medical attention to result in serious jeopardy to your health or body functions or organs; (2) active labor when there isn't enough time for safe transfer to a Plan hospital (or designated hospital) before delivery, or if transfer poses a threat to your (or your unborn child's) health and safety, or (3) a mental disorder that manifests itself by acute symptoms of sufficient severity such that either you are an immediate danger to yourself or others, or you are not immediately able to provide for, or use, food, shelter, or clothing, due to the mental disorder.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of specific medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.