

## COUGH COLD FLU

### Understanding the Common Cold -- the Basics

A runny nose, scratchy throat, and nonstop sneezing -- you can't miss the signs of a cold. But mystery shrouds a lot of other things about it. Why do you seem to get them so often while your best friend stays well? And more importantly, how can you stay healthy this year? Get the lowdown on the all-too-common common cold.

#### What Is It?

It's an illness caused by a virus. More than 200 types lead to your misery, but the most common one is the rhinovirus, which is thought to be responsible for at least 50% of colds. Other viruses that can cause colds include coronavirus, respiratory syncytial virus, influenza and parainfluenza.

Colds cause a lot of people to stay home. The CDC says 22 million school days are lost each year in the U.S. because of them. Some estimates say that Americans have 1 billion colds a year.

#### What Viruses Cause the Common Cold?

A cold is another name for an upper respiratory infection. You catch one when germs infect your upper respiratory tract, which includes your:

- Nose. Your nostrils serve as the entrance to your respiratory system.
- Nasal cavities. These are the hollow spaces that let air flow into and out of your nose.
- Sinuses. Air-filled spaces in your cheeks and forehead, your sinuses warm and filter the air you breathe into your body. They also affect how your voice sounds, among other things.
- Larynx. You might also hear this called your voice box.
- Your entire respiratory system is lined with membranes that produce a slippery liquid called mucus. It helps trap some foreign invaders, like dust and pollen, that try to sneak by. Tissues inside your nasal cavities also help clean the air you inhale. But as fine-tuned as this system is, it's not perfect. And germs can still sometimes find a way in.
- Here are a few of the most common cold viruses.
- **Rhinovirus.** Doctors have found three different types and at least 169 different strains of rhinovirus around the globe. It's most active in early fall, spring, and summer. Rhinoviruses cause 10%-40% of colds. You'll feel miserable when you catch one, but they rarely make you seriously sick.
- **Coronavirus.** This group of viruses is common in people and animals. They were discovered in the 1960s. Some kinds only cause mild cold symptoms, but a newer kind, SARS-CoV-2, causes COVID-19. A coronavirus strain is most likely to cause your cold in the winter and early spring.

**Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV).** This virus is so common that most kids have it by the time they turn 2 years old. While RSV symptoms are often mild, they can get severe enough that you'll need to go to the hospital.

#### Can I prevent flu or cold symptoms?

The most important prevention measure for preventing colds and flu is frequent hand washing. Hand washing by rubbing the hands with warm soapy water for at least 20 seconds helps to slough germs off the [skin](#).

In addition to hand washing to prevent flu or cold symptoms, you can also get a flu vaccine to prevent seasonal influenza. Seasonal flu activity in the United States generally peaks between late December and early March. Within two weeks of getting a flu vaccine, antibodies develop in the body and provide protection against flu. Children receiving the vaccine for the first time need two doses delivered one month apart.

Antiviral medicine may also help prevent flu if you have been exposed to someone with flu symptoms.

**Human parainfluenza virus (HPIV).** Researchers have found four types of this family of viruses. HPIV-1 and HPIV-2 are the kinds most likely to give you a cold. Sometimes HPIV can cause more severe conditions like croup, bronchitis, and pneumonia.

There are also a lot of cold viruses that doctors haven't identified. About 20%-30% of [colds](#) in adults are caused by an "unknown" bug.

### **How cold germs enter your body**

Colds are highly contagious. Common ways you can catch one include:

- Being around someone with a cold who coughs, sneezes, or talks close to you
- Sharing objects like towels or sheets that have the virus on them
- Touching your eyes, nose, or mouth after touching something that has a cold virus on it

### **Common Cold Myths**

There's a lot of false or misleading health information online, especially on social media sites or websites that are trying to sell you products. Here's what you might have heard about common colds and whether it's true.

#### **Myth: Being out in cold weather will give you a cold.**

Fact: Generally, you do come into contact with more germs outdoors than indoors. But there's no proof that you'll get sick from spending time in cold temps.

#### **Myth: Being overheated can make you sick.**

Fact: Hot weather can lead to many health issues, from dehydration (not getting enough fluids) to heat stroke. It can also worsen chronic health conditions like asthma, diabetes, and heart disease. Results of an early study appear to show that short-term exposure to hot temperatures could increase inflammation in your body and keep your immune system from working at its best. But more research is needed to better understand this link.

#### **Myth: Dairy products can lead to a cold.**

Fact: You may have heard that eating or drinking dairy products causes your body to make more mucus, and that excess buildup can lead to a cold. That isn't true. But some dairy products can coat

your mouth and throat, making them feel slimy. That may remind you of how congested, or stuffed up, you feel when you're sick with a cold.

- Related:[Tonsillitis: Symptoms, Causes, and Treatments](#)

**Myth: Vitamin C can help you stave off a cold.**

Fact: Studies show that vitamin C has a lot of health benefits, including helping your immune system work well. Even so, this potent vitamin can't prevent you from catching a cold.

What vitamin C can do is speed up your recovery process if you do get sick. Eating plenty of fruits and vegetables should provide you with the C you need. If you want to take a supplement, look for one that doesn't exceed 500 milligrams. Check with your doctor before you start, especially if you have other health issues or already take other medications or supplements.

**Myth: You're getting sick because your tonsils or adenoids are large.**

Fact: If your tonsils and adenoids get infected, they can cause cold-like symptoms.

Your tonsils are small pads at the back of your throat. They help make white blood cells that fight off germs. Most people's tonsils are about the same size, but repeated infections can make your tonsils bigger. That can lead to other health issues, including trouble breathing and sleep apnea.

Like tonsils, adenoids are also part of your immune system. These tissues hang above your tonsils and also help catch germs. Most of the time, adenoids get smaller in childhood, but infections, like a cold, can cause them to swell up. That can cause symptoms like a runny nose and sore throat.

Enlarged adenoids that don't come back down in size are rare in adults. If they're causing issues, your doctor may treat them with antibiotics or remove them.

**Myth: Allergies don't make a cold more likely.**

Fact: Research suggests that [allergies](#) that affect your nose or throat may raise your chances of getting infected by a cold virus. On the other hand, some viruses may also make you more likely to have allergies or asthma.

**Myth: Stress isn't good for your immune system.**

In small doses, stress can activate your immune system. In the short term, that can be a good thing. Your body's defenses are ready to fight. But if your feelings of stress don't go away, your immune system never "turns off." Over time, that can hurt your health. Your body actually starts to make fewer white blood cells to fight off infection. That makes catching a common cold more likely.

- Related:[Bronchitis: See What Happens](#)

**Other Causes of the Common Cold**

Despite all that researchers have learned about the common cold, there's a lot more to uncover. For instance, the causes of 20%-30% of adult colds remain unknown.

What is certain is that many factors can increase your chances of catching a cold. The list includes:

**Being in a crowded indoor area.** Cold germs can spread quickly and easily in places like schools, childcare centers, and airports.

**Low humidity.** Very dry air can dry out your nasal passages. Without as much mucus, germs have an easier time infecting you.

**Smoking.** Even being around secondhand smoke makes it more likely that you'll get sick.

**Not getting enough sleep.** One study found that people who slept less than seven hours each night were three times more likely to catch a cold than people who slept eight hours or more.

### How a Common Cold Starts

You can catch it from another person who is infected with the virus. This can happen by direct physical contact with someone who has a cold, or by touching a surface contaminated with their germs -- like a computer keyboard, doorknob or spoon --- and then touching your nose or mouth. You can also catch it from infected droplets in the air released by a sneeze or a cough.

A cold begins when a virus attaches to the lining of your nose or throat. Your immune system -- the body's defense against germs -- sends out white [blood cells](#) to attack this invader. Unless you've had a run-in with that exact strain of the virus before, the initial attack can fail and your body sends in reinforcements. Your nose and throat get inflamed and make a lot of mucus. With so much of your energy directed at fighting the cold virus, you're left feeling tired and miserable.

One myth that needs to get busted: Getting chilly or wet doesn't cause you to get sick. But there are things that make you prone to come down with a cold. For example, you're more likely to catch one if you're extremely tired, under emotional distress, or have [allergies](#) with nose and throat symptoms.

### When do I call the doctor with flu or cold symptoms?

If you already have flu or cold symptoms, it's important to call your doctor if you also have any of the following severe symptoms:

- **Persistent fever:** A fever lasting more than three days can be a sign of another bacterial infection that should be treated.
- **Painful swallowing:** Although a sore throat from a cold or flu can cause mild discomfort, severe pain could mean [strep throat](#), which requires treatment by a doctor.
- **Persistent coughing:** When a cough doesn't go away after two or three weeks, it could be bronchitis, which may need an antibiotic. Postnasal drip or sinusitis can also result in a persistent cough. In addition, asthma is another cause of persistent coughing.
- **Persistent congestion and headaches:** When colds and [allergies cause](#) congestion and blockage of sinus passages, they can lead to a sinus infection (sinusitis). If you have pain around the eyes and face with thick nasal discharge after a week, you may have a bacterial infection and possibly need an antibiotic. Most sinus infections, however, do not need an antibiotic.

In some cases, you may need to get emergency medical attention right away. In adults, signs of a crisis include:

- Severe [chest pain](#)
- Severe headache
- Shortness of breath
- [Dizziness](#)
- Confusion

- Persistent vomiting

In children, additional signs of an emergency are:

- Difficulty breathing or rapid breathing
- Bluish skin color
- Not drinking enough fluids
- Lethargy and failure to interact normally
- Extreme irritability or distress
- Symptoms that were improving and then suddenly worsen
- Fever with a rash

## Is it flu or cold symptoms?

How do you know if you have flu or cold symptoms? Take your temperature, say many experts. Flu symptoms often mimic cold symptoms with nasal congestion, cough, aches, and malaise. But a [common cold](#) rarely has symptoms of fever above 101 degrees. With flu symptoms, you will probably have a fever initially with the flu virus and you will feel miserable. Body and muscle aches are also more common with the flu. This table can help determine if you have cold or flu symptoms.

Symptoms	Cold	Flu
Fever	Sometimes, usually mild	Usual; higher (100-102 F; occasionally higher, especially in young children); lasts 3 to 4 days
<a href="#">Headache</a>	Occasionally	Common
General Aches, Pains	Slight	Usual; often severe
<a href="#">Fatigue</a> , Weakness	Sometimes	Usual; can last 2 to 3 weeks
Extreme Exhaustion	Never	Usual; at the beginning of the illness

Stuffy Nose	Common	Sometimes
<a href="#">Sneezing</a>	Usual	Sometimes
Sore Throat	Common	Sometimes
Chest Discomfort, Cough	Mild to moderate; hacking cough	Common; can become severe
<b>Complications</b>	<a href="#">Sinus</a> congestion; middle ear infection	<a href="#">Sinusitis</a> , <a href="#">bronchitis</a> , <a href="#">ear infection</a> , pneumonia; can be life-threatening
<b>Prevention</b>	Wash hands often; avoid close contact with anyone with a cold	Wash hands often; avoid close contact with anyone who has flu symptoms; get the annual <a href="#">flu vaccine</a>
<b>Treatment</b>	<a href="#">Decongestants</a> ; pain reliever/fever reducer medicines	Decongestants, pain relievers, or fever reducers are available over the counter; over-the-counter cough and cold medicines should not be given to young children; prescription antiviral drugs for flu may be given in some cases; call your doctor for more information about treatment.

#### What are common flu symptoms?

[Flu symptoms](#) are usually more severe than cold symptoms and come on quickly. Symptoms of flu include sore throat, fever, [headache](#), muscle aches and soreness, congestion, and [cough](#). [Swine flu](#) in particular is also associated with [vomiting](#) and [diarrhea](#).

Most [flu symptoms](#) gradually improve over two to five days, but it's not uncommon to feel run down for a week or more. A common complication of the flu is pneumonia, particularly in the young, elderly, or people with [lung](#) or [heart](#) problems. If you notice shortness of breath, let your doctor know. Another common sign of pneumonia is a fever that comes back after having been gone for a day or two.

Just like cold viruses, flu viruses enter your body through the mucous membranes of the nose, [eyes](#), or [mouth](#). Every time you touch your hand to one of these areas, you could be infecting yourself with a virus, which makes it very important to keep hands germ-free with frequent washing to prevent both flu and cold symptoms.

### **How long do cold symptoms last?**

Cold symptoms usually last for about a week. During the first three days that you have cold symptoms, you are contagious. This means you can pass the cold to others, so stay home and get some much-needed rest.

If cold symptoms do not seem to be improving after a week, you may have a bacterial infection, which means you may need [antibiotics](#).

Sometimes you may mistake cold symptoms for [allergic rhinitis \(hay fever\)](#) or a sinus infection. If cold symptoms begin quickly and are improving after a week, then it is usually a cold, not an allergy. If your cold symptoms do not seem to be getting better after a week, check with your doctor to see if you have developed an allergy or sinusitis.

When you wake up [sneezing](#), [coughing](#), and have that achy, feverish, can't-move-a-muscle feeling, how do you know whether you have [cold symptoms](#) or the flu?

It's important to know the difference between flu and cold [symptoms](#). A cold is a milder respiratory illness than the [flu](#). While [cold symptoms](#) can make you feel bad for a few days, [flu symptoms](#) can make you feel quite ill for a few days to weeks. The flu can also result in serious health problems such as [pneumonia](#) and hospitalizations.

### **What are common cold symptoms?**

Cold symptoms usually begin with a [sore throat](#), which usually goes away after a day or two. Nasal symptoms, [runny nose](#), and congestion follow, along with a [cough](#) by the fourth and fifth days. Fever is uncommon in adults, but a slight fever is possible. Children are more likely to have a fever with a cold.

With [cold symptoms](#), the nose teems with watery nasal secretions for the first few days. Later, these become thicker and darker. Dark mucus is natural and does not usually mean you have developed a [bacterial infection](#), such as a [sinus infection](#).

Several hundred different viruses may cause your cold symptoms.

### **Colds and Your Newborn**

Your little one is at higher risk for colds and other infections for the first 4 to 6 weeks. That's because their immune system -- the body's defense against germs -- isn't working at full speed yet.

To help your newborn from getting sick, [breastfeed](#) them if possible. It gives them antibodies that fight germs. If you bottle-feed, sterilize the bottles and nipples between feedings. To do this, boil them or put them in the dishwasher.

Keep their formula or [breast](#) milk in the refrigerator until you need it. Then warm the milk and give it to your baby right away, before bacteria have a chance to grow. Throw out any unused portions after each feeding. Your baby's [saliva](#) has germs that multiply quickly. And [wash your hands](#) before and after you feed your baby or change their diaper.

Keep your little one away from anyone who's sick. If possible, avoid crowds and public transportation when you go out with your baby.

### **Young Kids**

If your [toddler](#) or [preschooler](#) seems to have one cold after another, you are not alone. Most young kids get five to seven -- or more -- [colds](#) each year.

And that's not all. Ear infections are common, especially for kids with brothers and sisters or who spend time with their friends in [daycare](#).

For this age group, there's no big mystery about how colds spread. If your kid touches their [runny nose](#) and then puts their hands on a toy, those cold germs are still around when another child picks it up.

Follow these tips to help keep your youngster healthy:

- Wash their toys with soap and water and then let them air-dry. Use a dishwasher if it won't mess them up.
- Wash pacifiers often with soap and water.
- Regularly wipe your kid's hands with a clean washcloth and warm water.
- Make sure their hands get washed before eating and after playtime.

### **Day Care**

Colds can spread easily in daycare, so you'll want to take some extra steps to keep your child healthy.

Teach them to [wash their hands](#) the right way. Make sure they get them wet with water and plain soap and rub for 20 to 30 seconds. An easy way for them to get the timing right -- sing "Happy Birthday" twice while they wash. Remind them to wash up before eating and after going to the bathroom.

Also, follow these tips:

- Tell your child not to share cups, glasses, forks, or spoons.
- Keep them at home when he's sick.
- Make sure they get [enough sleep](#), eat a healthy diet, and get plenty of time to play outdoors.
- Replace their [toothbrush](#) and make sure they don't borrow one from their brother or sister.

### **Life in College Dorms**

It's easy to catch a cold if you live in a college dorm, where lots of students live in a small space and breathe the same air and touch the same surfaces.

Tell your student to follow some of the same advice they needed back when they were in preschool: Wash hands often, eat healthy foods, and get as much sleep as possible.

## **Weak Immune Systems**

If you've got a weakened immune system, you're at a higher risk for colds. That's the case if you have AIDS, get [chemotherapy](#), or just have had an [organ transplant](#).

Make sure everyone in your family is up to date with their vaccines. Your visitors may need to wear gloves and masks so they don't spread their germs to you.

And like anyone who wants to keep germs at bay, try to have a nutritious diet and get enough rest.

## **Older Adults**

As you get older, especially from age 65 and on, you're at more risk for getting colds, and they may stick around longer, too.

To stay healthy, eat right, get plenty of exercise, drink lots of water, and get enough rest.

Wash your hands thoroughly several times a day, and especially before eating and after you go to the bathroom.

Also, never share a toothbrush, and make sure you replace your toothbrush regularly.

## **Home Remedies for Colds**

Don't let that nasty cold get the best of you. Take charge with simple do-it-yourself treatments that clear up your stuffy nose and soothe your scratchy throat.

### **No. 1: Drink Up**

Get plenty of fluids. It helps break up your congestion, makes your throat moist, and keeps you from getting dehydrated.

Need ideas for something to drink? Try water, sports drinks, herbal teas, fruit drinks, or [ginger ale](#). Your mother's chicken [soup](#) might help, too!

### **No. 2: Make It Steamy**

You can loosen up your stuffy nose if you breathe in some steam. Hold your head over a pot of boiling water and breathe slowly through your nose. But be careful. Don't let the heat burn your nose.

You can also get some relief with a humidifier in your bedroom. Also try to take in some moisture from a hot shower with the door closed.

### **No. 3: Blow Your Nose**

It's better than sniffling mucus back into your head. But make sure you do it the right way. If you blow hard, you'll send germ-carrying [phlegm](#) back into your ear passages, which can lead to an earache.

### **No. 4: Use Saline Spray or Saltwater Rinse**

Both can help break up the congestion in your nose. If you go the rinsing route, try this recipe:

- Mix 3 teaspoons of iodide-free salt and 1 teaspoon [baking soda](#).

- Place in an airtight container.
- Add 1 teaspoon of this mixture to 8 ounces of lukewarm boiled or distilled water.

Next, fill a bulb syringe with this solution (or use a neti pot.) Lean your head over a basin and gently squirt the salt water into your nose. Hold one nostril closed by applying light finger pressure while squirting the mixture into the other nostril. Let it drain. Then treat the other nostril.

Always use distilled, sterile, or previously boiled water when you make this solution. Otherwise you might get an infection. Also, rinse the bulb or [neti pot](#) after each use and leave it open to air dry.

#### **No. 5: Try a Sinus Device**

Use tools like the ClearUp sinus relief device or SinuSonic to help beat cold symptoms. You can get them without a prescription.

The ClearUp device temporarily opens your airways and eases your sinus pain. As you move it along your face, it uses a mild electrical current to stimulate nerves in your sinuses.

SinuSonic uses sound vibrations and pressure to open your nasal passages. To use it, you hold it over your nose while you breathe in and out.

#### **No. 6: Stay Warm and Rested**

It's especially important to get rest when you first come down with a cold or the flu. Rest helps your body direct its energy to fighting off your infection. This battle taxes your body. So give it a little help by lying down under a blanket to stay warm if necessary.

#### **No. 7: Gargle With Warm Salt Water**

It moistens your sore or scratchy throat and brings temporary relief. Try a half teaspoon of salt dissolved in 8 ounces of warm water four times a day.

To calm the tickle in your throat, try a gargle made from tea. Or use one that's got honey in it.

#### **No. 8: Drink Hot Liquids**

They relieve your congestion and soothe the inflamed lining of your nose and throat.

If you're so congested you can't [sleep](#) at night, try a hot toddy, an age-old remedy. Here's how:

- Make a cup of hot herbal tea.
- Add 1 teaspoon of honey and one small shot (about 1 ounce) of whiskey or bourbon if you wish (adults only!).

Limit yourself to one, though. Too much alcohol inflames the membranes in your nose and throat.

#### **No. 9: Use Mentholated Salve**

Try a small dab under your nose. It opens up breathing passages.

Menthol, eucalyptus, and camphor all have mild numbing ingredients that may help relieve the pain of a nose rubbed raw.

#### **No. 10: Put Hot Packs on Your Sinuses**

You can buy reusable ones at a drugstore. Or make your own. Take a damp washcloth and heat it for 30 seconds in a microwave. Test the temperature first to make sure it's right for you.

- Related:[Tonsillitis: Symptoms, Causes, and Treatments](#)

#### No. 11: Try an Extra Pillow Under Your Head

Do this at night when you sleep to help relieve congested nasal passages. If the angle is too awkward, place the pillows between the mattress and the box springs to create a more comfy slope.

### Common Cold Prevention

#### Why Hand Washing Works

Some viruses -- tiny living things that cause colds -- can live on surfaces for hours. Regular [hand washing](#) is your best strategy to keep them from getting inside your body. And of course, if you're the one who's sick, washing up will keep you from spreading your germs.

There's some evidence behind this. A program called Operation Stop [Cough](#) was started at a military recruit training command center in Illinois. As part of the program, recruits were told to wash their hands at least five times a day. After 2 years, the hand-washing team reported 45% fewer cases of respiratory illness, compared with sickness rates among recruits during the year before the program started.

#### How Should I Wash My Hands for Cold Prevention?

Many of us get so busy, we simply forget to wash our hands the right way. Here's the drill:

- First, wet your hands with water. Then add soap.
- Rub them together vigorously for 20 seconds. Make sure to rub the wrists, between the fingers, and under the [fingernails](#). When you have time, use a nailbrush, as germs often hide under nails.
- Rinse your hands thoroughly and dry with a clean paper towel or air dryer.
- If you are in a public restroom, shut the faucet off with a paper towel. Try to push the door open with your [shoulder](#), or use another paper towel to turn the knob.
- Related:[4 Warning Signs That Your Cold Is Bronchitis](#)

#### How Much Hand Washing Is Enough to Prevent Colds?

You should wash hands often throughout the day. For example, do it before and after you eat, after using the bathroom, after school, and after handling any raw meat, unwashed vegetables, or garbage.

Also wash your hands after [coughing](#), [sneezing](#), blowing your nose, or touching your pet. If you're babysitting, wash before and after changing a baby's diapers and before and after feedings.

#### What if I'm Not Near a Sink?

Keep an alcohol-based sanitizer for hands if a sink is unavailable. It should be at least 60% alcohol.

Rub the entire surface of your hands, fingers, and wrist with the sanitizer until dry. You can use this throughout the day if you're not near a bathroom. Follow up with a thorough hand scrub when you're near a sink to prevent buildup of the sanitizer.

## **Do You Have a Cold or Flu?**

### **What Are the Symptoms of the Flu?**

You may feel very weak and tired for up to 2 or 3 weeks. You'll have muscle aches and periods of chills and sweats as fever comes and goes. You may also have a stuffy or [runny nose](#), headache, and [sore throat](#).

### **Can I Compare Flu and Cold Symptoms?**

This chart can help you see the differences and similarities. Then, if you get [flu symptoms](#), call your doctor and ask about an antiviral drug.

Symptoms	Cold	Flu
Fever	Rare	Characteristic, high (100-102 degrees F); lasts 3 to 4 days
<a href="#">Headache</a>	Rare	Prominent
General Aches, Pains	Slight	Usual; often severe
<a href="#">Fatigue, Weakness</a>	Quite mild	Can last up to 2 to 3 weeks
Extreme Exhaustion	Rare	Early and prominent
Stuffy, Runny Nose	Common	Sometimes
<a href="#">Sneezing</a>	Usual	Sometimes
Sore Throat	Common	Sometimes
Chest Discomfort, <a href="#">Cough</a>	Mild to moderate; hacking <a href="#">cough</a>	Common; can become severe

<b>Complications</b>	<a href="#">Sinus</a> congestion or <a href="#">earache</a>	<a href="#">Bronchitis</a> , <a href="#">pneumonia</a> ; can be life-threatening
<b>Prevention</b>	Good hygiene	Good hygiene and an annual <a href="#">flu vaccine</a>

<b>Treatment</b>	Only temporary relief of symptoms	Antiviral drugs <a href="#">oseltamivir (Tamiflu)</a> , <a href="#">zanamivir</a> (Relenza), or peramivir (Rapivab) within 24-48 hours of onset
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If you don't make an effort to prevent it, odds are that you'll catch the flu this season.

For most of us, it means a couple of weeks out of work or school, then life goes back to normal. But the flu can be serious, even deadly, if you have a health condition like [asthma](#), [heart disease](#), [diabetes](#), or a weakened immune system.

The trick is not to get sick in the first place. Here are proven ways to avoid the flu.

### Get Vaccinated

Experts say the single best way to avoid the [flu](#) is to get the [flu shot](#) as soon as you can. The ideal time is early fall. But any time during the winter is fine if you haven't already done it.

The vaccine is designed to protect against the flu strains health experts believe will be most widespread each season -- for example, the [H1N1 "swine flu."](#) Some [vaccines](#) work against four flu strains -- you might hear them called quadrivalent. Others guard against four strains -- doctors will call them quadrivalent.

### Know the Vaccine Types

**The flu "shot"** contains a dead virus. One kind that's approved for people 6 months and older goes straight into the muscle. Another uses a smaller needle that only goes into the top layer of your [skin](#). It's available for people ages 18 to 64.

**The nasal spray, FluMist,** contains a live but weakened form of the virus. It's approved for those between ages 2 and 49 who are healthy, not allergic to the flu vaccine, and not [pregnant](#).

**Egg-free vaccines** are for people between the ages of 18 and 49 who have severe egg [allergies](#). If your allergy is severe, you should get the flu shot from a doctor who can treat a severe allergic reaction -- either at your doctor's office, a hospital, a clinic, or a health department. Many children with egg allergies are at risk for complications from the flu, so it's important for them to get the flu shot.

**Fluzone** is a high-dose version for those ages 65 and older. It's better at protecting an older person's immune system.

- **Related:**[Bronchitis Home Remedies](#)

There are "needle-less" options for people ages 18 to 64:

- The jet injector vaccine with Afluria uses a tool and high pressure to deliver the vaccine.

- Fluad Quadrivalent is a shot that uses an adjuvant, an ingredient that helps create a stronger immune response in those ages 65 and older.

Don't make excuses for skipping your flu shot. Your arm might be a little sore the next day. And you may feel a little achy or run a [low fever](#) afterward. But you can't catch the flu from the [vaccine](#). It contains a weakened or killed form of the virus.

### **Build a Germ Barrier**

It's easy to catch the flu. When a nearby sick person sneezes or [coughs](#), they send out a spray of virus-laden droplets straight to your open [mouth](#) or nose.

You can also pick it up from touching a surface -- like the restaurant table where a sick person dined before you. Flu germs can linger on places like tables, counters, desks, doorknobs, and faucets for up to 8 hours.

When you touch a germy surface and put your hands on your [eyes](#), nose, or mouth, your fingers bring the virus right into your body.

You can try to avoid sick people, but that's not always easy to do, especially when you're in close quarters like movie theaters and malls. If you can't steer clear of the virus, at least use good hygiene to create a barrier against flu germs.

- [Wash your hands](#) with warm water and soap every time you shake hands or touch a surface that might be germ-covered.
- Carry an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with you for times when you can't get to a sink.
- Bring along disinfectant wipes to clean any surfaces you're about to touch.
- Take extra care to not touch your [mouth](#), eyes, or nose without washing your hands first.

Sharing is wonderful, but not during flu season. Be stingy with your utensils, plates, glasses, and anything else you touch with your [mouth](#). Wash used dishes and utensils in the dishwasher or in the sink with hot water and soap.

- **Related:**[Tonsillitis: Symptoms, Causes, and Treatments](#)

### **Take Care of Yourself**

If you want your immune system to be in good enough shape to fight off the flu and other germs, you need to stay healthy.

- Eat a [balanced diet](#).
- [Exercise](#) at least 5 days a week.
- Get 7 to 9 hours of [sleep](#) a night.

All these will give your body the strength it needs to fend off an [influenza](#) attack.

### **Quit Smoking**

In addition to everything else [smoking](#) does to your body -- from boosting your [cancer](#) risk to giving you premature wrinkles -- it could make you more likely to get the flu.

There's evidence that smokers get the flu more often than people who don't light up. And when they do get sick, smokers tend to have a more severe infection and a higher risk of dying from the flu.

Holding off this nasty illness is just one more reason to talk to your doctor about ways to [quit smoking](#).

### Take Your Medicine

All these steps should keep you pretty well-armed against the flu. Still, even the best defense isn't perfect.

In case you do get sick, ask your doctor about antiviral flu drugs like [baloxavir \(Xofluza\)](#), oseltamivir (Tamiflu), [peramivir \(Rapivab\)](#), or zanamivir (Relenza). They can help you get better faster. But you need to take them within the first 2 days of getting sick.

If you do come down with the flu this season, look out for others. You can spread it for up to a week after you get sick. Don't share germs with your friends, family, and co-workers.

- Stay home until you feel better and your fever has been gone (without the help of medicine) for at least 24 hours.
- Sneeze into your elbow, not your hand. That way you can't pass it around.
- Toss used tissues after you blow your nose. Don't leave them lying around for someone else to find.