Cold and flu prevention

You know the symptoms – a runny nose, sneezing and a scratchy throat. Are you getting the dreaded cold? But what if you also have a fever, aches and chills? Then, you might have the flu.

Whether it’s the cold or flu, getting sick is never fun. Adults average two to four colds each year and children catch between six and eight.¹

Wouldn’t it be better if you could avoid a cold or the flu in the first place? You can take simple steps to decrease your chances of getting sick. For example, just a little extra handwashing can save you a week or longer of sniffling, shivering misery. See Washing your hands like a pro for some tips.

To avoid the flu, getting a flu shot can be your best bet. For more information, check out Remember to get your flu shot!

Remember to get your flu shot!

The best way to protect yourself against the flu is to get vaccinated each year. Vaccine experts now recommend that everyone six months and older get a flu shot. This is especially important if you live with or care for people at high risk for developing the flu, such as children younger than five, those who are 50 years of age or older and those with certain chronic medical conditions.⁴

There are two types of vaccines:

- The “flu shot” is given with a needle and approved for people older than six months, including healthy people and those with chronic medical conditions.
- The nasal-spray flu vaccine is approved for healthy people 2 to 49 years old who are not pregnant.

Yearly flu vaccinations should begin in September or as soon as vaccine is available.⁴

There are some people who should not get a flu vaccine without first checking with their doctor. This includes children younger than six months of age and those who have:

- A severe allergy to chicken eggs
- Had a severe reaction to an influenza vaccination
- Developed Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS) within six weeks of getting an influenza vaccine
- A moderate-to-severe illness with a fever (they should wait until they recover to get vaccinated)⁴
Prevention

While it’s nearly impossible to completely avoid cold or flu viruses, prevention is simple. Here are some tips:

- **Clean shared surfaces** like telephones, keyboards, steering wheels and doorknobs often.
- **Make sleep a priority.** Your body’s immune system does its best work while you’re sleeping. Lack of sleep can reduce the effectiveness of your immune system and make you vulnerable to infection.²
- **Stay hydrated.** Drink plenty of water and avoid alcohol and caffeine, which can be dehydrating.³

Treatment

You can combat much of the discomfort from colds and flu with over-the-counter medications. However, be sure that you know what ingredients are in all the drugs you’re taking to avoid taking too much. Also, check with your doctor before taking any medication if you’re pregnant, breastfeeding, or another prescription drug or being treated for an ongoing health condition. Antibiotics aren’t effective in treating viral infections like a cold or influenza, although your doctor may prescribe them if you develop a secondary infection like sinusitis or pneumonia.¹

Currently, no antiviral medications are available to treat the common cold, but several have been approved for treating the flu in people who haven’t been vaccinated.⁶ Get plenty of rest, and don’t go back to your normal activity level until you feel up to it.

Sources

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²WebMD, Use Your Immune System to Prevent Flu (September 25, 2009): webmd.com
³WebMD, 11 Natural Tips to Prevent a Cold (February 21, 2010): webmd.com
⁴Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Key Facts About Seasonal Flu Vaccine (July 2010): cdc.gov/flu/protect/keyfacts.htm
⁵Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Handwashing: Hand Hygiene Saves Lives (June 2, 2010): cdc.gov

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