

Reliable steps for staying on your feet



Get ahead of cold and flu season

There's still no cure for the common cold or flu, but there are definitely things you can do to minimize the impact of these illnesses on your life. Let's break those strategies down into four parts:

1. Strengthen your immune system
2. Practice strong germ defense
3. Take care of yourself if you do get sick
4. Know your symptoms

Strengthen your immune system

A healthy immune system is more capable of fighting off a virus, or at least reducing the length or severity of a bout of cold or flu. Here are a few of the lifestyle habits to help build a strong immune system:¹

- Don't smoke
- Eat a diet high in fruits and vegetables
- Maintain a healthy weight
- If you drink alcohol, drink only in moderation
- Get adequate sleep
- Take steps to avoid infection, such as washing your hands frequently and cooking meals thoroughly
- Try to minimize stress
- Keep current with all recommended vaccines. Vaccines prime your immune system to fight off infections before they take hold in your body.

Practice strong germ defense

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggests that one of the most effective germ defenses against the flu is your annual vaccination. In addition to a flu vaccination, adopt these sensible habits:²

- **Wash your hands often.** Frequent hand washing with hot water and soap for at least 20 seconds helps get rid of most germs you might pick up from touching surfaces used by other people. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand rub.
- **Avoid touching your face,** especially your nose, mouth and eye areas, and especially if you have been touching surfaces in public areas or are around someone who is sick.
- **Keep household and workplace surfaces clean.** Be sure to wipe surfaces and objects with a disinfectant solution.
- **Use paper towels** in the kitchen and bathroom when drying your hands. Germs can live for several hours on cloth towels. At home, use separate towels for each family member to minimize the transmission of viruses.
- **Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you sneeze.** Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
- **Ventilate your home.** After a cough or sneeze, some viruses stay suspended in the air for hours. Keeping your space ventilated helps eliminate conditions where these viruses and bacteria thrive.
- **Avoid close contact with people who are sick.** If you are sick, limit contact with others as much as possible to keep from infecting them.

Taking care of yourself if you do get sick

Whether you are sick with the flu or a cold, over-the-counter medication such as decongestants, acetaminophen and cough syrups may help relieve congestion, aches and other symptoms you might experience. Some people take natural remedies, such as zinc, vitamin C or Echinacea; however, studies haven't yet conclusively confirmed whether these remedies can prevent or reduce the symptoms or length of your cold.³

There are prescription medications called “antiviral drugs” that can be used in certain situations to treat the flu. Antiviral treatment works best when started soon after flu begins, especially within the first two days, but starting them later can still be helpful if the sick person has a higher risk factor, such as age or chronic condition, or is very sick from flu. Check with your doctor to explore antiviral treatment.²

There are also lifestyle and home remedies to make yourself as comfortable as possible when you get sick:

- **Drink plenty of fluids.** Water, juice, clear broth or warm lemon water are good choices. Try avoiding liquids that may dehydrate you, like alcohol.
- **Eat soup.** Soup and other warm fluids can be soothing and can help loosen your congestion.
- **Rest.** If you have a fever or a bad cough, stay home. This will give you a chance to rest, as well as reduce the chances you'll pass the virus to others.
- **Adjust your room's temperature and humidity.** Keep your room warm, but not overheated. If the air is dry, a humidifier or vaporizer can moisten the air and help ease your congestion and coughing.
- **Soothe your throat.** A saltwater gargle — 1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon of salt dissolved in a glass of warm water — can temporarily relieve your sore or scratchy throat.
- **Use saline nasal drops** to help relieve your nasal congestion.

Know your symptoms

While there is often not much a doctor can do for a routine cold or flu, if you're doing all the right things but are still not feeling better (or even feeling worse), you should call your healthcare provider. In general, you should call your doctor if you have:

- A fever greater than 101.3 F (38.5 C)
- A fever lasting five days or more
- A fever that returns after a fever-free period
- Shortness of breath
- Wheezing
- Severe sore throat, headache or sinus pain
- Your condition doesn't improve or seems to get worse

Sources:

1. Harvard Health Publishing/Harvard Medical School. How to Boost Your Immune System, February 15, 2021. Available from www.health.harvard.edu.
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. How to Prevent Flu, August 31, 2022. Available from www.cdc.gov.
3. Mayo Clinic. Zinc for Colds: The Final Word? August 8, 2020. Available from www.mayoclinic.org.

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