



Pharmaceutical  
Society of Australia



# Colds and Flu

**Common colds and the ‘flu’ (influenza) are viral infections affecting the nose, sinuses, throat and airways. Antibiotics are not effective against these viral infections, but colds and the flu usually get better on their own. The uncomfortable symptoms of colds and flu can be relieved with medicines.**

When someone has a cold or flu, secretions from their nose, mouth and airways contain the infecting virus. Colds and flu spread when this infected fluid passes to someone else (e.g., by touch, coughing, sneezing). Colds spread easily, especially between children who spend a lot of time together (e.g., at childcare or school). A cold is most contagious in the first one or two days after symptoms develop.

## Signs and symptoms

Cold symptoms include:

- Runny or blocked nose (congestion)
- Sore throat
- Red, watery eyes
- Sneezing
- Coughing
- Mild fever
- Headache
- Tiredness.

Flu (influenza) symptoms are similar to cold symptoms, but are usually more severe and may also include:

- High fevers, sweating and shivering
- Aching muscles and joints
- Weakness and lethargy
- Loss of appetite, nausea and vomiting.

Cold and flu symptoms usually disappear within 10 days, although a cough may last longer.

## Protection against influenza

A ‘flu injection’ will give protection against the current flu strain and annual vaccination, before the flu season starts, is recommended for all adults over 65 years and others at a higher risk of getting influenza. Prescription medicines to treat influenza are also available. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

## Self care

- Get plenty of sleep and rest and stay comfortably warm. A child with the flu should rest and keep warm until their temperature has been normal for 48 hours.
- Drink enough water every day to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine ‘light-coloured’ (unless a doctor advises otherwise).
- Breathe in steam (e.g., from inhalations, vaporisers, showers, baths) to loosen mucus. Avoid inhalations for young children, as steam can burn.
- Blow nose gently, with one or both nostrils open. Mucus can be removed from a baby’s nostrils with a bulb syringe – ask a pharmacist.
- Cover nose blowing, coughing and sneezing with a tissue and dispose of used tissues carefully.
- Keep hands away from eyes, nose and mouth.
- Wash hands with soap regularly, especially before cooking or eating and after blowing nose.
- Wash children’s dummies and toys regularly.
- Avoid sharing eating and drinking utensils.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and grain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Avoid cigarette smoke – it can make symptoms worse.
- Limit alcohol.

## Important

A more serious viral or bacterial infection or other medical condition may develop from a cold or the flu (e.g., an ear infection, sinusitis, asthma, bronchitis, pneumonia). Bacterial infections usually need antibiotic treatment.

Consult a doctor if symptoms persist for more than 10 days or if any of the following symptoms develop:

- High temperature (over 38.5°C) or chills
- Severe headache
- Stiff neck
- Light hurts eyes
- Skin rash, pale or mottled skin
- Difficulty waking up or unusual drowsiness
- Ear ache
- Shortness of breath, noisy or fast breathing or difficulty breathing
- Persistent cough
- Yellow, brown, green or blood stained mucus (phlegm)
- Chest pain
- Muscle aches
- Eyes sticky with pus
- A child refuses feeds or fluids, is excessively irritable, has a strange high pitched cry or has a bulging fontanelle.

## Medicines

A variety of non-prescription medicines can help relieve cold and flu symptoms. Some are not suitable for young children, pregnant or breastfeeding women or people with certain medical conditions (e.g., diabetes, glaucoma, high blood pressure). Some can interfere with other medicines. Always ask a pharmacist for advice.

Medicines that can help relieve cold and flu symptoms include:

### Decongestants

- May relieve nasal congestion. They are available as syrups, tablets, nasal sprays and drops.
- Nasal sprays and drops should not be used for more than five days in a row.
- Check with a doctor or pharmacist before giving to children.

### Antihistamines

- May help reduce runny nose, sneezing and allergy symptoms.
- Certain antihistamines should not be given to children under 2 years unless prescribed by a doctor.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

## Cough suppressants

- May relieve a dry unproductive cough.
- Should not be used for a productive 'chesty' cough.
- Check with a doctor or pharmacist before giving to children.

## Expectorants and Mucolytics

- May loosen and thin mucus (phlegm) in the nose, sinuses and airways.

## Relief of pain and fever

Simple pain relievers (e.g., paracetamol, ibuprofen) can relieve headache, sore throat, aches, fever and shivering.

**Note:** Aspirin should not be given to children under 16 years of age, unless advised by a doctor.

## Other treatments

- Saline (salt water) nose sprays and drops may help thin mucus in the nose and sinuses.
- Medicated inhalations (e.g., menthol, eucalyptus) may help clear nasal congestion. Check with a doctor or pharmacist before giving to children.
- Sucking on lozenges may relieve sore throats and coughing. Avoid in young children.
- Gargles (anti-inflammatory, anaesthetic or antiseptic) can relieve sore throats. Avoid in young children.

**Note:** There is no conclusive scientific evidence that herbal or vitamin products help prevent or treat colds and flu.

## Related fact cards

- *Antibiotics*
- *Complementary Medicines*
- *Coughs*
- *Ear Problems*
- *Hay fever*
- *Headache*
- *Medicines & Driving (website only – ask your pharmacist)*
- *Pain Relievers*
- *Sinus Problems*
- *Vitamins*

## For more information

'Common colds need common sense' – website [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

InFLUenza – website [www.fightflu.gov.au](http://www.fightflu.gov.au)

**Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)** leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

**NPS Medicines Line** – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

**The Poisons Information Centre** – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.