

# Colds and flu (influenza)

Colds and flu (influenza) are common infections that can occur at any time of the year; however, they tend to be more common in autumn and winter.

Sometimes it can be difficult to tell the difference between a cold or the flu.

## What causes a cold or flu?

Viruses cause colds and flu. But the viruses that cause a cold are different from the ones that cause flu.

Colds are mostly due to rhinoviruses or coronaviruses, but with over 200 different cold viruses identified, it is not uncommon to have several colds, one after another.

Influenza viruses are grouped into four main types: A, B, C, and D. Flu epidemics that occur every year are mostly caused by types A and B.

There are always several major flu viruses circulating every year and flu viruses mutate (change) frequently, which is why some people get the flu every year or have several bouts of flu within one year.

## How are colds and flu different?

The flu is generally much more severe than a cold and every year hundreds of people die from the flu in New Zealand. Flu symptoms tend to come on quickly and are bad from the start, whereas a cold may slowly get worse over a few days.

You are also more likely to get the following with flu:

- a dry, tickly cough, that makes you want to “a-hem” (a cough associated with a cold is usually chesty and produces mucus)
- backaches, joint aches or muscle aches
- exhaustion or tiredness that may force you to bed
- fever (body temperature over 38°C although a fever may not be present in elderly people)
- a headache
- nausea (feeling sick), vomiting, diarrhoea, or a poor appetite
- shivers, chills or sweats.

Most people who get the flu recover within two weeks. Some develop complications, such as pneumonia, and may need to go to a hospital.

Colds are more likely to cause nasal congestion, a runny nose, and sneezing. Symptoms are milder than flu and complications are unlikely.



**Tip:** Ask your GP about the annual influenza vaccine. It should be given every year and is free if you are over 65, pregnant or have certain long-term health conditions – see [www.fightflu.co.nz](http://www.fightflu.co.nz) There is no vaccine to prevent a cold.

## Treating a cold

Most cold symptoms only last a few days then start to improve. While you have a cold try to:

- drink plenty of fluids to help keep your mucus thin and loose and easier to blow out or cough up. Avoid alcohol
- get some rest – this helps speed your recovery. Ask a pharmacist for advice about products for symptoms such as nasal congestion, a sore throat, or a cough.
- Saline nasal spray, drops or nasal rinses help reduce nasal congestion.
- Sucking lozenges or taking a teaspoon of honey will help soothe a sore throat or a cough. Note: Lozenges may be a choking hazard for young children and honey should not be given to infants under 12 months old.
- Paracetamol or ibuprofen help relieve pain associated with a headache but make sure you don't accidentally “double-dose” with other medicines that contain similar ingredients. Ask your pharmacist.

**Important:** Children under 16 years should not be given aspirin. Most over-the-counter cough and cold remedies should not be used in children under six years.

If your symptoms suddenly become much worse or if they do not improve in five to seven days, call Healthline free on **0800 611 116** or contact your GP (doctor).

### Who should see a doctor?

People with other health problems, such as asthma or diabetes; babies; young children; or elderly people may need to see a doctor, especially if you are concerned about how sick they are. Always see a doctor straight away (or call for an ambulance if it is an emergency) if the person:

- is having difficulty breathing or complains of chest pain
- has signs of dehydration (dizzy when standing up, lack of urination, thirsty, lethargic)
- is vomiting and unable to keep fluids down
- develops seizures
- has blue or purple lips
- is making you worried that something is ‘not right’.

### Will antibiotics help me?

Antibiotics only treat bacterial infections. They do not kill cold or flu viruses or stop them from getting worse. It takes a few days for your own immune system to start tackling these viruses, but within a week or two, you should feel better.

Some people may develop a bacterial infection soon after catching a cold or the flu, and antibiotics may be needed to treat this. This is called a secondary bacterial infection and symptoms include:

- mucus that becomes thick, discoloured, or bloody
- painful lungs, wheezing or being short of breath
- sore or painful ears, or a discharge from the ears
- very sore throat or pus on the tonsils
- painful sinuses or tooth pain.

See your doctor if any of these symptoms happen.

### What if I have the flu?

The flu can be very serious and you should phone your doctor if you are worried about your symptoms or those of the person you are looking after. Those more at risk of severe flu symptoms include:

- older people
- people with certain medical conditions such as asthma or COPD; cancer; kidney disease; or diabetes
- pregnant women
- people who are very overweight or obese.

**Tip:** Call Healthline on 0800 611 116 for 24-hour advice, or call your GP and tell them you think you have the flu.

### Treating the flu

The tips mentioned under “Treating a cold” will also help you recover from the flu. Dehydration is more common with the flu, because you may not feel like drinking or you may be feeling sick. See your GP if you or the person you are looking after are showing signs of dehydration.

Try not to infect others. Stay at home and cover coughs with a tissue. Dispose of used tissues in a bin. Wash hands regularly or use an alcohol gel. Tell others that you are unwell so they can look out for you.

**Tip:** An antiviral drug may shorten the flu but only if taken in the first 48 hours of symptoms – talk to your doctor

### Meningococcal disease

Meningococcal disease is a bacterial infection of the brain and/or blood system that can be deadly. Symptoms may start off like the flu but quickly get worse.

#### A baby or infant may:

- have a fever (perhaps also cold hands and feet)
- have a high-pitched, moaning cry or be irritable
- refuse drinks or feeds, or vomit
- be sleepy or floppy or harder to wake
- have a bulging fontanelle (top of the head in babies)
- dislike bright lights or have a stiff neck
- have a rash or spots (anywhere, no matter how small)
- look unwell.

#### Older children, teens, and adults may:

- have a fever or a severe headache
- vomit, have diarrhoea or cramps
- be sleepy, confused, delirious or unconscious
- have a stiff neck (can they touch their chin to their chest?)
- dislike bright lights
- have joint pain and aching muscles
- have a rash or spots (anywhere, no matter how small).

**Contact a doctor or hospital immediately, day or night, if you suspect meningococcal disease.**

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