

Cold, Flu, and Respiratory Infection tips

Flu (Influenza) season is upon us. The single best way to prevent the flu is to **get vaccinated** each fall. Good health habits can help protect against the flu and other respiratory illnesses during cold and flu season. **Stay home** when you are sick to help prevent others from catching your illness and let your body focus its energy on fighting the infection. **Cover your mouth and nose** with a tissue or your elbow, rather than your hand, when coughing or sneezing. Respiratory infections can spread more effectively by your own hands to your eyes, nose, or mouth than from contaminated air. **Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth** with your hands and **wash your hands** after touching your face.

Do I have the common cold or influenza?

Flu symptoms are much worse than your typical common cold and include: abrupt onset of high fever, shaking chills, muscle aches, runny nose, sore throat, loss of appetite, cough, headache, and general fatigue.

What tests are available?

Signs and symptoms may be sufficient for your doctor to diagnosis influenza. A nasal swab is available that can aid in diagnosis and differentiate type A from type B (which may help with medication selection). Pulse oximetry (a painless measure of oxygenation) and chest X-ray may be useful when lower respiratory symptoms are significant.

What treatment is available?

Although most viral infections are treated symptomatically, there are specific prescription medications available to treat influenza. It is best to see your doctor early, as these are most effective in decreasing symptom severity and duration if started within 48 hours of symptom onset. Antibiotics may be considered if there is concern that your infection may be bacterial.

What else can I do to help myself?

Motrin can be used for fever control and aches. Elevate your head and chest while in bed, get plenty of rest, and stay well hydrated to keep secretions loose (keep fluids within arms length and use a humidifier). A saline nasal spray (OTC) helps loosen nasal secretions and can help nasal congestion and sinusitis. Over-the-counter flu medications do not treat the infection but can help decrease bothersome symptoms. Antihistamines may dry secretions too much and should be reserved for allergy symptoms rather than respiratory infections. Limit decongestants to just prior to airline flights or to decrease (not eliminate) severe congestion or drainage.

For additional information on this and other health issues, visit: MedlinePlus.gov