



## How to protect yourself from colds and the flu

Colds, the flu, and chest colds are common. In fact, many adults get three to four colds a year. The good news is that most people begin to feel better within a week or two. That said, some symptoms, including coughs, can last up to three weeks.

Viruses—not bacteria—cause colds, the flu, and chest colds. You may have used antibiotics before when you were sick, and they may have seemed to work. But antibiotics only kill bacteria. They do not work for colds or the flu, so chances are your body would have recovered just as quickly on its own without them.

Using antibiotics that you don't need can hurt you. It can increase your chances of being infected by bacteria that antibiotics can't kill. It can also cause side effects, like upset stomach, diarrhea, vaginal infections, rashes, and (more rarely) life-threatening allergic reactions. This can happen even with antibiotics you have used before without any problems.

On the other hand, over-the-counter medicines, like decongestants or cough drops, and home remedies may help ease symptoms while your body heals itself.

### PREVENTING COLDS AND THE FLU

Here are three tips that may help prevent you from getting a cold or the flu:

- Get a flu vaccination. All persons 6 months and older should be vaccinated against the flu. This year's flu vaccination will protect you against the seasonal flu and the H1N1 virus strain.
- Wash your hands often—wash with soap and warm water for at least 15 seconds, or use a waterless, alcohol-based hand cleanser.
- Maintain a healthy diet, exercise regularly, manage your stress, and get plenty of rest.



## DON'T LET IT SPREAD

If you do get a cold or the flu, try to prevent spreading it. Take the following precautions:

- **Hand hygiene**—Wash your hands with soap and water for at least 15 seconds, or use an alcohol-based hand cleanser after you've been in public, had contact with anyone with a cold or the flu, or used your hand to cover a cough or sneeze. Teach your children to wash their hands, too.
- **Cough etiquette**—When you need to cough, wear a mask or turn your head away from others. Use a tissue and throw it away when you're done. If you don't have a tissue, use the inside of your elbow. "Cover your cough" respiratory hygiene stations are conveniently located in most Kaiser Permanente medical offices. Remind your kids to cover their cough as well.
- **Avoid close contact with others**—No snuggling, hugging, or kissing.
- **Stay home**—Don't go to school or work if you have a cold or the flu. Contact an advice nurse if you aren't sure whether you're infectious.
- **Don't share**—Avoid sharing anything that goes into your mouth, like water bottles and lip balm.
- **Clean frequently**—If someone has a cold or the flu, clean surfaces you both touch. This can include doorknobs, refrigerator handles, and telephones.
- **Don't smoke**—If you smoke, this is a good time to quit. Smoking makes you and others more susceptible to disease.

## EASING SYMPTOMS

*For general relief:*

- Get extra rest. When you return to work, try to take it easy.
- Drink lots of fluids, at least 8 to 10 glasses a day. Hot herbal tea, warm water, and chicken soup are especially good for congestion.
- Take acetaminophen (like Tylenol) or ibuprofen (like Advil) for fever or body aches.

*For your runny or stuffy nose:*

- Yellow or green mucus is common with a cold and doesn't mean you have a bacterial infection or need antibiotics.
- Keep the inside of your nose moist with a saltwater solution. You can purchase saline nose drops or sprays (like Ocean Nasal Spray). Or see your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise® Handbook* for instructions on how to make a saltwater solution at home.
- Breathe warm, moist air from a steamy shower, hot bath, or sink filled with hot water.
- Use a decongestant nose spray with oxymetazoline (like Afrin). Don't use it more than three days in a row.
- Take an oral decongestant (like over-the-counter phenylephrine). Please note that pseudoephedrine now requires a prescription.
- Apply moist heat with a warm towel or gel pack to your face three or four times a day for 5 to 10 minutes each time.

*For your cough:*

- Use cough drops to soothe irritation. Be sure to drink lots of fluids.
- Use a cough suppressant containing dextromethorphan (like Robitussin DM).

*For your sore throat:*

- Gargle with warm saltwater twice a day. Mix 1 teaspoon of salt in 1 cup of warm water.
- Use a sore throat spray or medicated lozenge (like Chloraseptic or Cepacol).

## WHEN YOU NEED MEDICAL CARE

Call Kaiser Permanente at 1-800-813-2000 if you have:

- Trouble breathing, wheezing, or tightness in your chest.
- A cough that lasts longer than three weeks.
- A very sore throat and a hard time swallowing.
- Severe ear pain, sudden hearing loss, or discharge from your ear(s).
- A fever of:
  - 104 degrees or higher that does not go down after two hours of home treatment.
  - 101 degrees or higher for two days or more.
- Gotten better, then gotten worse again.

Visit your Kaiser Permanente pharmacy for over-the-counter medications to ease cold and flu symptoms.

## OTHER RESOURCES

Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise® Handbook*. It's available at any Membership Services desk.

## DO YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FLU?

Visit [kp.org/flu](http://kp.org/flu) for helpful advice on preventing and treating the flu.

