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## **Introduction**

Winter is here again and, colds and flu are on the increase. Colds, coughs and flu are more common in the winter. That's because people spend more time indoors, and germs spread more easily in confined spaces. But there are things you can do to help stop germs spreading and protect yourself from catching them.

### **What is cold and flu?**

Colds and flu may have similar symptoms such as a blocked or runny nose, sore throat, cough and blocked sinuses often leading to a headache. In addition a person suffering from flu will usually have a high temperature, feel very unwell and very tired. Although colds and flu can make you feel miserable, your body will usually fight off the infection on its own, without medical treatment.

### **Colds**

Symptoms can include a blocked runny nose, sneezing, sore throat and a cough. You may also have a raised temperature, aching muscles and general tiredness.

The symptoms of a cold tend to be worse during the first 2-3 days and then ease over the next few days.

### **Flu**

The symptoms of flu are similar to colds but the muscle aching is usually more severe and the tiredness may last for a few weeks after the illness has cleared up. You are likely to have a fever and you may also lose your appetite, feel or be sick or have diarrhoea. A flu may last 7-14 days or longer.

### **Treatment**

There is no cure for colds or flu. Antibiotics, which treat infections due to bacteria, do not work on the cold and flu viruses.

- Drink fluids to prevent dehydration
- Seek pharmacy advice on mild painkillers to lower temperature
- Ask your pharmacist advice on steam inhalations and decongestant medication.
- Rest

- If symptoms do not improve or if you develop a productive cough with green or yellow phlegm, contact your surgery

### **What can we do to minimise the risk?**

People don't just catch germs by breathing in droplets from the air, for example when someone sneezes. You can easily pick up a virus on your hands, for example from a handrail on public transport. The germs then get into your body when you rub your eyes, touch your mouth or prepare food without washing your hands first. This is the most common way of catching cold and flu viruses.

### **What you can do:**

- Regularly wash your hands, especially before and after preparing food, and after using the toilet. Soap and hot water is fine, or try alcohol gel if it's more convenient. Dry them thoroughly.
- Make sure you clean surfaces, such as desks, kitchen worktops and tables, thoroughly and regularly. Cold and flu viruses can live two days on surfaces.
- Newspapers, lift buttons, door handles and computer keyboards are all potential sources of germs. Remember to wash your hands after touching things that might have other people's germs on them.

To avoid spreading germs around, if you have a cold or flu:

- Use disposable (paper) tissues and throw them away after use.
- Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze, to avoid spreading virus-laden droplets. Then wash your hands, so you don't wipe the germs onto surfaces that could infect other people.

### **What does this mean for me?**

For most people, colds and flu are minor illnesses, however unwelcome. But older people (over 65) and those with certain long-term illnesses can become very unwell from flu. It's especially important to protect yourself against germs if you are in one of these high risk groups, or to avoid spreading germs if you are caring for someone in a high risk group.

High risk groups include people with breathing problems (such as asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), heart disease or kidney disease, as well as anyone over 65 and anyone living in care homes. People in these groups are advised to have the flu vaccine every year. Contact your GP.

### **References:**

Health Protection Agency – [www.hpa.org.uk](http://www.hpa.org.uk)

NHS Direct – [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)

British Medical Journal – [www.bmj.com](http://www.bmj.com)