



Stay Healthy During Flu Season by Following Several Easy Steps



When the days get shorter and the temperatures start to drop each fall, it's a sign that flu season is upon us. Each year, between 10% and 20% of Americans get the flu, or influenza. The flu is a respiratory infection caused by viruses that spreads from person to person. It can range from mild to severe — even deadly.

The flu can lead to more serious conditions like pneumonia or ear or sinus infections, or it can worsen existing health problems like asthma, diabetes or heart failure.

Once someone is infected with the flu, they spread the virus through tiny droplets when they talk, cough, sneeze or touch a surface. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), people are most contagious during the first three or four days of becoming sick. However, it's possible to infect others a day before symptoms develop and up to a week after becoming sick.

Anyone can catch the flu, but older adults, children and people with weakened immune systems have a higher risk of getting sick.

What's the difference between a cold and the flu?

Common colds and the flu have similar symptoms, but the flu comes on more quickly — typically one to four days after being exposed to the virus. The symptoms are usually more pronounced than the runny nose and sneezing that come with colds or seasonal allergies.

If you have the flu, you may have some or all these symptoms:

- Body aches
- Cough
- Fever or chills
- Headache
- Runny or stuffy nose
- Sore throat
- Tiredness

Children may also experience vomiting and diarrhea when they have the flu.

Why you should get the flu vaccine

Although you can't totally prevent the flu, one of the best ways to protect against it is by getting the flu vaccine. The vaccine makes your body produce germ-fighting antibodies that strengthen your immune system and fight infection when you're exposed to flu viruses. And, when you protect yourself from the flu, you protect the people around you — your family, friends and coworkers.

Although the effectiveness varies from year to year, the CDC says that the vaccine can reduce the risk of flu illness by up to 60%. Vaccination also significantly reduces the risk of flu-related hospitalizations.

The CDC recommends yearly flu vaccines for just about everyone over 6 months old. Talk to your doctor to make sure it's right for you. To learn more about flu vaccination, visit the [CDC website](#).

Tips to prevent the flu

Although getting vaccinated is the best way to prevent the flu, these tips can also help keep you healthy during flu season:

- **Avoid close contact if you or someone else is sick.** Whenever possible, stay away from people who are sick. If you think you have the flu, the CDC recommends you stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone — except to get medical supplies or care — to prevent spreading it to others.

- **Clean surfaces and objects.** Disinfect surfaces — such as countertops, light switches, door handles and TV remotes — that are touched frequently, especially when someone is sick. At work, don't use other people's pens, and wash your hands often.
- **Cover your cough or sneeze.** Cough into your elbow, not your hands, where you won't spread germs through touch. Sneeze into a tissue and throw it away. Make sure you wash your hands immediately after you cough or sneeze into your hands.
- **Don't touch your eyes, nose or mouth.** This is the way germs enter your body.
- **Wash your hands.** Wash thoroughly with soap and water frequently, or use an alcohol-based gel if you can't wash your hands. Be extra vigilant when someone around you is sick.

If you do get sick this flu season, stay home until you feel better. This lets you get the rest you need to recover. And, it's the right thing to do — it means you don't infect others. When it comes to the flu, we can all play a role in preventing its spread.

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