

# Fight off colds and flu.

Dealing with cold and flu is an annual battle we face each winter. These common viruses affect your nose, throat and lungs and spread very easily through the population. This factsheet compares cold and flu symptoms, offers guidance on treatment, as well as information about the flu vaccine.



## Winter, colds and flu

Winter brings cold weather, less sunlight and cold and flu viruses. The cold weather poses its own health risks for some more vulnerable groups of people, like the over 65s, young children, and those with a disability or a mental health condition.

Colds and flu are thought to occur more in winter months for a number of reasons:

- we stay indoors more in winter, and breathe the same air
- we experience less sunlight in winter and make less Vitamin D and melatonin. This affects our immune system and ability to fight off viruses
- the flu virus may survive better in cold and dry conditions

## Colds v flu: what's the difference?

The common cold and influenza or flu are both caused by respiratory viruses. Both produce similar symptoms, but cold tends to be milder and less serious than flu.

It can be difficult to tell the difference between a bad cold and a mild case of flu. Colds usually develop gradually, while flu can come on quickly. The table below provides a guide to common differences between cold and flu.

Symptom	Cold	Flu
<b>Blocked nose</b>	Yes	Sometimes
<b>Sore throat</b>	Yes	Common
<b>Coughs</b>	Yes	Yes
<b>High temperature</b>	Not often	Yes
<b>Body aches</b>	Not often	Yes
<b>Upset stomach</b>	Rare	Sometimes

## Treating colds and flu

You can usually treat a cold yourself, by getting rest, taking painkillers or decongestants, keeping warm and hydrated. Your local pharmacist can offer advice on which medicines will best treat your symptoms.

More severe than the common cold, flu usually lasts one to two weeks. In milder cases, you can treat yourself in the same way you would with a bad case of the cold.

However, if your cold or flu symptoms don't get better within seven days, you're over 65, are pregnant, have a

medical condition or are worried about your baby or child, you should call 111 or your GP for medical advice.

Antibiotics are not usually given to treat cold or flu symptoms, as they help treat bacterial infections. The common cold and flu are caused by a virus.

## Getting the flu vaccine

You should get the flu vaccine if you're advised to by your doctor. It's a safe way of protecting yourself from flu. You can get the flu vaccine on the NHS if you're:

- 65 or over
- pregnant
- have certain health conditions
- in residential care
- receive a carer's allowance

You will also be entitled to a free NHS flu jab in certain other circumstances. Check with your GP's surgery or local chemist's about how to book yours.

## Preventing viruses from spreading

Cold and flu viruses are highly contagious and spread easily through the population. The best way to prevent colds and flu from spreading is to practise good hygiene:

- wash your hands regularly
- don't share things like cups or towels
- avoid touching your eyes or nose



**Flu will often get better on its own, but it can make some people seriously ill. It's important to get the flu vaccine if you're advised to.**

**NHS Health A-Z**