

Caring for Yourself or Someone Else Who Has the Flu

Common signs of flu (influenza) include:

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Muscle and body aches
- Chills or feeling cold
- Headache (may be severe)
- Eye pain
- Sore throat
- Stuffy nose or runny nose
- Dry cough (may become a deep, hacking cough over a few days)
- Coughing up thin mucus at first
- Not feeling hungry or thirsty

What supplies should I have on hand?

- Thermometer – Disinfect between uses with an alcohol wipe
- Tissues
- Acetaminophen (Tylenol®, other brands or generic)
- Plain saline nasal spray (contains no medicine)
- Cough medicine with guaifenesin and dextromethorphan
- Fluids and light food
- Alcohol gel

How can I cope with flu symptoms?

Rest is critical. Restrict activities while you are ill. Take it easy for several days even when you start to feel better. Over-the-counter medicine may help relieve aches and a stuffy nose. Do not take doses that are larger or more frequent than what it says on the package.

If a sick child is younger than 4, talk to a doctor or nurse before you give any over-the-counter cold medicine. Do not treat a child's fever with aspirin.

Rest with your head slightly raised. Use a pillow or lie in a recliner. This makes breathing easier and limits congestion. If your throat is sore, gargle with a mixture of ¼ teaspoon salt dissolved in ½ cup of warm water. Suck on hard candy or a soothing lozenge. To relieve a stuffy nose, use plain saline nasal spray with no added medicine. Do not share the spray with others.

How should I treat a fever?

Fever is the body's natural way to fight infection. The correct response depends on the age of the person who has the fever. **Call or make an appointment in any of these cases:**

- Infant less than 4 months old with a fever
- Child with a fever of 104° Fahrenheit
- Child with a fever that lasts more than 3 days
- Young healthy adult with a fever of more than 102° Fahrenheit
- Adult more than 60 years old with a fever of 101° Fahrenheit or higher
- Pregnant woman with a fever of 101° Fahrenheit or higher
- Regardless of age, when a fever comes back a day after temperature seemed to return to normal

In all other cases, let fever run its course while your immune system works. Keep as comfortable as you can. Avoid getting chilled. You will feel cold and then hot as the fever climbs. You may look pale, and nail beds may look a little blue.

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Muscles will ache and feel tight. You may have trouble breathing. Wrapping in a blanket warmed in a clothes dryer may help.

Once your fever has peaked, you will feel flushed. Your skin will be hot and dry. Your temperature will be high and your headache may feel worse. Acetaminophen (Tylenol®) may provide some relief at this point. **Do not treat a child's fever with aspirin.**

Then you will begin to sweat and feel exhausted. Cool down slowly. Take off layers of blankets and clothing. After sweating ends, washing your face and changing your bed clothes and linen may be of some comfort. Put on something dry and lightweight. Avoid sponging with alcohol or bathing in cool water. This may make you feel worse again.

Fever dries you inside and out. Take frequent sips of water and other liquids even if you do not feel thirsty. Keep doing this after the fever breaks, too. Keep your mouth clean and moist.

What room temperature and humidity are best?

Keep your room temperature around 70° Fahrenheit. Cooler air is easier to breathe than warm, dry air. Good ventilation dilutes the amount of germs in the air. Do not smoke or be near others who smoke when you have the flu. Humidity should be 30 to 50 %. You may need a humidifier or cool mist vaporizer during the winter.

What should I eat and drink?

Caffeine-free fruit juice, sport drinks, tea and water are preferred. Fluids with a lot of caffeine cause more dehydration, stomach upset and increased heart rate. Dehydration increases sinus congestion and breathing problems. Salty foods also have a drying effect on your body.

Eat clear soups (chicken and other flavors), crackers, applesauce, frozen fruit, rice, boiled potatoes, eggs, dry toast and other light foods. Low-fat dairy products will be easy on your stomach. Avoid greasy foods, red meat and rich dairy products or desserts.

What are signs of dehydration?

Dehydration can lead to severe problems. **Call one of the numbers below if you notice these signs:**

- Thirst (often an early sign) that cannot be eased by drinking fluids
- Flushed face
- Dry mouth
- Rapid and deep breathing
- Fast and/or weak pulse
- Sunken, tearless eyes
- Little or no urine output
- Dark colored urine
- Dizziness made worse by standing
- Weakness
- Sleepiness or irritability
- Headache
- In infants, sunken "soft spot" on top of the head

When should I seek treatment?

Most people get better without needing to see a doctor or nurse. Unless you are at higher risk for complications, you should not need antiviral treatment. Antivirals such as oseltamivir (Tamiflu®) or zanamivir (Relenza®) are recommended for these high-risk groups:

- Children younger than 5 years old
- Adults 65 years and older
- Pregnant women
- Persons with certain chronic medical or immunosuppressive conditions
- Persons younger than 19 years of age who are receiving long-term aspirin therapy.

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If you or someone you care for has the flu and is in one of these high-risk groups, call or make an appointment. For the best results, treatment should start within 48 hours of the first signs of flu. If you become very ill, treatment can help even when it begins after more than 48 hours of symptoms.

Will antibiotics help?

Antibiotics will not help because flu is caused by a virus. Antibiotics kill bacteria. If you start to feel better but then have trouble breathing or feel sick again, you may have a new infection caused by bacteria. Some people always carry bacteria in the nose and respiratory tract. They may be more likely to develop a bacterial infection after a viral infection. If you have this problem, you should get the flu vaccine each year. Many of these people may also need a pneumonia vaccine.

Other reasons to call or make an appointment

- Vomiting that is severe or will not stop
- A child who is in a constant state of feeling irritable and does not want to be held
- Flu-like symptoms that improve but then return with fever and worse cough
- Wheezing

Call 9-1-1 if you notice these symptoms:

- Breathing difficulties
- Lips or skin look gray or blue
- Chest pain
- High fever that can not be lowered or managed
- Seizure
- Confusion
- Person seems less alert or passes out

- Unable to wake up
- Difficulty moving or talking

How can I prevent spreading the flu?

- Wash your hand often with soap and water. Alcohol gel is also a good way to kill the germs on your hands. Remind those in close contact with you to wash their hands after touching items that could have your germs on them so they do not get sick.
- Clean items that are often touched or shared (e.g., remote controls, phone, light switch, bathroom fixtures, video games, etc.)
- Do not share common drinking cups.
- Do not share bathroom linens.
- Do not share a bed or the same room with someone while ill. Wash your bed linens once you start to feel better.
- If you are sick, do not care for someone else who is at risk for serious illness.
- Keep fresh air coming into your room or home. Open windows.
- Do not attend family events or social functions while you are sick. Ask people not to visit you while you are sick.
- Wear a mask and use alcohol gel if you need to come to the clinic.

If you have other questions or concerns

From 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday

Call the clinic where you receive regular care. Make an appointment to see a doctor.

After 4:30 p.m. or on weekends and holidays

Call Telephone Nurse Advisor at (608) 775-4454 or (800) 858-1050.