

What causes the flu?

The flu (influenza) is caused by a virus. It can come on quickly and make you feel very sick. You are most at risk for catching the flu during flu season, which is in the late fall and winter.

Common symptoms of flu are fever, chills, body aches, headache, tiredness, a dry cough, and sore throat. The flu can last from a few days to a couple of weeks. Some symptoms of the flu, such as a dry cough, can last longer.

What causes a cold?

Colds are also caused by viruses. But they are not the same viruses that cause the flu. Colds are more common and you can catch a cold at any time of year. Some of the symptoms of a cold can be the same as the flu, such as a sore throat, cough, headaches, and body aches. You can feel a cold coming on for a few days before you feel sick.

Colds can last 1 to 2 weeks. If you have a cold that lasts longer than 2 weeks, call your doctor. You might have allergies or a sinus infection.

Can a cold or the flu lead to something more serious?

A cold can cause sinus congestion and earaches in some people. The flu can lead to something more serious, such as pneumonia. People with a chronic health condition are at a higher risk for getting a serious illness from the flu. If you have a chronic condition, talk to a member of

your health care team about how to take care of yourself so your flu doesn't lead to something more serious.

Can antibiotics help if I have a cold or flu?

Antibiotics only work against bacterial infections. They won't kill the viruses that cause a cold or flu. In fact, taking antibiotics when you don't need them can lead to antibiotic-resistant bacteria. This means that if you get an illness caused by bacteria, antibiotics won't work. This makes it harder to treat the infection.

What can I do to feel better?

Here are some things you can do at home to help you feel better:

- Get plenty of rest. If you can, stay home from work or school for the first couple of days of your cold or flu. This will help you get the rest you need.
- Drink plenty of clear liquids. Drink about 8 ounces every 2 hours. Liquids will soothe a sore throat and help with a cough.
- Stay away from tobacco and wood smoke. Smoke irritates your lungs and causes a dry, hacking cough. If you smoke, or live with someone who does, call the Quit For Life® Program at 1-800-462-5327 for information about quitting.
- Take acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen, or aspirin to help with aches and pains.

People under the age of 20 should not take aspirin. It has been linked to Reye's syndrome, a rare but dangerous disease.

For fever

- Dress in light clothes. Bundling up in warm clothes can make your fever worse.

For plugged ears, nose, or head (congestion)

- Drink warm clear liquids, such as tea, soup and water. Eating sour or spicy foods can also help with congestion.
- Wash mucus out of your nasal passages with a saline (salt) solution. The Take Care Store has sinus rinse kits available. We don't recommend a bulb syringe for rinsing nasal passages. Bacteria can be left in the bulb even after rinsing it out. If you use a neti pot, it must be cleaned completely every time you use it.
- To make a saline solution for your neti pot: Dissolve ¼ teaspoon salt and a pinch of baking soda in 1 cup warm water. Make sure the water isn't too hot. Hot water will irritate your nasal passages. You can store the saline solution in refrigerator for up to a week.
- Use a vaporizer or breathe moist, warm steam from a hot shower.
- Try decongestant pills or a decongestant nasal spray, such as Afrin. Don't use a decongestant nasal spray for

more than 3 days. Longer use can make your symptoms worse.

For a sore throat or cough

- Take a cough medicine with dextromethorphan, such as Benylin or Delsym.
- Suck on popsicles, ice cubes, hard candy, or throat lozenges to soothe your throat.
- Gargle 4 to 6 times a day with salt water. Dissolve ¼ teaspoon salt in one cup warm water.

Call your doctor's office if you have:

- A fever over 100.5°F for more than 3 days.
- Trouble breathing or shortness of breath.
- Confusion or dizziness.
- A runny nose that lasts longer than 3 weeks.
- Severe headache or pain around the cheekbones or eyes that doesn't go away with home treatment.
- Sore throat that lasts longer than 7 days.
- Severe vomiting (can't keep any food down).
- Pain when you swallow, swollen glands and fever.
- Severe pain when bending your neck.
- Had recent contact with someone who has strep throat.

Other home treatments

Although there isn't strong scientific evidence to prove these are effective, the following home treatments might help:

- Vitamin C (about 1,500 mg a day) starting on the first day of your cold. Studies show that, on average, this can shorten your cold by about half a day. Some multivitamins contain this amount of vitamin C.
- Zinc lozenges every 2-3 hours starting the first day you have cold symptoms. It isn't clear how well zinc works, but it might shorten cold symptoms by 3 days. Zinc often causes a bad taste and can cause an upset stomach. Don't take zinc if you are pregnant. Topical zinc, such as Zicam spray, isn't recommended. Taking this type of zinc has been linked with a loss of smell.
- Echinacea (about 500 mg three times a day) might ease cold symptoms.
Warning: Echinacea can interact with certain drugs. Be sure to talk to your doctor or pharmacist if you are taking other medications. Don't take echinacea if you are pregnant, have a weakened immune system, or are allergic to plants in the daisy family.

- Guaifenesin tablets (such as Mucinex) may help your cough. Try 600-1200 mg twice a day.

What you can do to protect yourself:

- Get a seasonal flu shot.
- Wash your hands often with warm, soapy water.
- Use alcohol-based hand sanitizers frequently to clean your hands.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth. Germs are spread this way.
- Avoid close contact with sick people.
- If you smoke, quit. People who smoke are more likely to catch a cold and more likely to have a flu develop into a more serious infection, such as pneumonia.

Should I get a flu shot?

The flu shot can't protect against all flu viruses, but getting a flu shot can help protect against the most common types of flu.

Kaiser Permanente recommends a flu shot every year for everyone age 6 months and older. People at highest risk for problems from the flu should especially receive a flu shot. This includes people who:

- Are 65 years or older.
- Live in a nursing home or live in housing with people that have chronic medical conditions.
- Have a chronic illness, such as diabetes, heart disease, kidney failure, cancer, or a lung problem, such as asthma

or cystic fibrosis.

- Have an immune disorder or a suppressed immune system caused by taking medicine.
- Will be pregnant during the flu season.

Resources: Where can I get more information?

The **Consulting Nurse Service** is available to Kaiser Permanente members with medical questions or concerns. Call 24 hours a day 1-800-297-6877.

The **Kaiser Permanente Resource Line** can provide information on a variety of health topics. Call weekdays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. 1-800-992-2279.

Visit the Health and Wellness Resources section on the **Kaiser Permanente website** at kp.org/wa.

Flu & cold: Self-care for adults

- Home treatment
- When to call your doctor
- Getting a flu shot