

Questions at a Glance

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1. Is the flu the same as a bad cold?

No. The "flu," or influenza, is caused by a family of viruses. Colds are also caused by a number of different viruses. Although respiratory viruses cause both colds and the flu (affecting the nose, throat and lungs), the symptoms are quite different.

- > Influenza or the "flu" typically results in:
 - > a high fever
 - > headache
 - > severe generalized aches and pains
 - > extreme fatigue and weakness
 - > coughing and chest discomfort
 - > sore throat (often, but not always)

Complications of the flu include pneumonia. Flu can be life threatening for people with other health problems.

A cold, on the other hand, usually results in:

- > a runny or stuffy nose
- > sometimes a mild to moderate cough
- > mild aches and pains
- > a sore throat (often, but not always)

Health Tip:

The best defence against infection is simple: *wash your hands.*



High fever and severe headache are rare with a cold. Complications of a cold include: bronchitis, sinus congestion and earaches.

2. How do colds and the flu spread?

Although they are quite different diseases, colds and the flu spread in a similar manner.

Both spread mostly by indirect contact. People get the viruses on their hands, after blowing their nose, coughing or sneezing, for example. They touch something, such as a doorknob, and transfer the virus to that surface. Then you come along and touch the doorknob. Now you have the virus on your hands. If you touch your eyes or put your fingers in your mouth or nose, watch out: you've just introduced the cold into your body.

Both viruses are also spread by droplets. This means that if someone with a cold or the flu sneezes or coughs, and you are within about a meter, the droplets may land on your eyes, nose or mouth, and you become infected. This is NOT the same as airborne transmission, where very fine "droplet nuclei" stay suspended in the air and travel long distances on air current. Neither colds nor the flu are spread this way under normal circumstances.

3. How can I avoid getting a cold or the flu?

Since influenza is so contagious, the best way to protect yourself is to get a flu shot each year. Even that usually only protects you about 70-90 per cent of the time, but that's better than nothing. The flu shot won't protect you against cold viruses, though, and unfortunately, there are no vaccinations for colds available yet.

Knowing how colds and the flu spread can help you to avoid catching them. It's almost certain that you'll pick up viruses on your hands, which others have deposited into your environment. But you can still avoid introducing these into your body by:

- > washing your hands frequently
- > keeping your hands away from your eyes, nose and mouth
- > not putting objects into your mouth that have been touched by others (e.g., pens, unwashed fruit from a supermarket)

Most of the time if you catch a cold, it's because you neglected to do one of these things at a critical moment.

If you have small children in day care or school, you're at very high risk of catching colds or the flu, because your kids are susceptible to most of these viruses, and bring them home regularly. Also, children are very skilled at spreading their viruses around the house onto everything they touch. So the above three pointers are especially important for you.

4. Can I catch a cold from getting chilled or wet?

No! No matter what your mother told you! The January 2001 Berkeley Wellness Letter says unequivocally: "In experiment after experiment, it has been shown that people catch colds only when exposed to viruses.... Cold winds and wet feet have nothing to do with it."

5. How can I avoid spreading germs to others when I've got a cold or the flu?

If you've got the flu, the best thing to do is to stay away from people. You'll be too sick to be very useful at work, in any case. (See Q6. Should I stay home from work...?) If you have a cold, however, you likely won't be sick enough to stay home. Nevertheless, there's a lot you can do:

- > Cough, sneeze or blow your nose into a tissue or into your upper arm. Don't cough into your hands, so you don't contaminate them and then touch other objects.
- > Right after you throw out a used tissue, wash your hands with soap and water or use one of the many alcohol-based hand sanitizers.
- > Avoid touching common objects as much as possible (such as, door handles, hand rails, etc.).
- > Don't shake hands with someone after you've just sneezed or coughed into your hands.

6. Should I stay home from work if I have a cold or the flu?

Ahhh!! The million-dollar question! The answer is, "It depends."

If you have influenza, you'll be far too sick to venture out of your bed, let alone the door. Any time you have a high fever (that is, 38 degrees Celsius or 100 degrees Fahrenheit or higher), you should stay at home, rest in bed, drink lots of fluids, etc. You're infectious for three to five days after the onset of symptoms, so you should stay home that long. In all likelihood, you'll be so tired and weak that you won't be much good at work anyway. You might even be a danger to yourself or to others if you have to drive a vehicle or operate machinery.

If you have a cold, however, you may feel well enough to work. There is tremendous variability in how sick you feel. It all depends on your own immunity and which of the over 100 cold viruses that you've picked up. You should be the judge of whether you'll be able to focus enough on your job to be safe and productive. However, remember that you are likely infectious for about 5 days, so if you do go to work, be sure to follow the pointers above. (See Q5. How can I

avoid spreading germs...?) Also note that some people have weakened immune systems and might get sicker from your germs than you did, or might take your germs home to an infant or elderly person (if they don't wash their hands...).

7. What about taking medications to relieve my cold or flu symptoms?

If you take any medications (such as cough syrup with codeine), you should be aware that they might cause drowsiness. That can be good if you're planning to stay in bed and get plenty of rest. If you're planning to go to work, however, it's a different story. You should either reduce the dosage or avoid activities that require alertness, such as driving a vehicle or operating machinery.

8. What about Echinacea, vitamin C, zinc, etc.?

The jury is still out. A lot has been written. Research is being done. There is some evidence that these products may shorten the course of a cold if you start taking them right at the start of the symptoms. But as the March 2001 Berkeley Wellness Letter points out, "As a way to ward off colds, hand washing beats whole car loads of Echinacea and mega doses of vitamin C. It's easy, cheap, and accessible to all."

9. Should I get the flu vaccine?

Yes. If you get this vaccine each fall, it will usually protect you about 70 to 90 per cent from getting the flu. You may not be at risk of requiring hospitalization or developing pneumonia or dying of the flu, but you are at risk each year of getting the flu and being really sick with it. So why not get vaccinated? It's free to all Ontarians.

10. What is the 24-hour or stomach flu?

It's not the flu at all. Usually, symptoms of what we call the 24-hour or stomach flu include: nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. This is not a disease of the respiratory tract, but

rather of the gastrointestinal tract (stomach and intestines). It's usually due to something you ate—a mild case of food poisoning or the infamous Norwalk virus. It could be caused by any of a number of bacteria or viruses that spread through food, water or unhygienic handling of food. But, this document is not about food-borne diseases. So, don't confuse the issue—although hand washing prevents the spread of those germs, too!

Sources of Information

- > Berkeley Wellness Letter, January and March 2001
- > Aventis Pasteur Flu Brochure, 2001
- > Control of Communicable Diseases Manual, 18th Edition, 2004

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