

# Seven Ways to Fight Off the Flu

“Oh, it’s just a touch of the flu,” some say as if they had nothing more than a cold. Yet each year, 36,000 people die from pneumonia and other complications of the influenza virus or flu.

Cold and flu symptoms resemble each other, but they differ in intensity. A cold generally starts out with some minor sniffing and sneezing. Cold symptoms mostly affect you above the neck. Flu symptoms come on suddenly and affect the body all over. A cold rarely moves into the lungs; the flu can cause pneumonia. You may be able to drag yourself to work with a cold, but with a flu, you’ll be too ill to leave your bed.

## With the flu, the following symptoms come on suddenly and intensely:

- Dry cough.
- Sore throat.
- Severe headache.
- General muscle aches or backache.
- Extreme fatigue.
- Chills.
- Fever.
- Nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea can occur, but are more common in children than in adults.

The most telling symptoms in that list are fatigue and muscle aches – these are normally absent with a cold.

The single best way to prevent getting the flu is to have a yearly flu vaccine. Guidelines for flu vaccine are given yearly. Find out about them from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at 1.800.CDC.INFO (232.4636) or [www.cdc.gov/flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu). Follow your doctor’s advice for flu vaccine.

Also, a prescribed antiviral medicine can help shorten the duration of the flu and make symptoms milder. To be effective, the antiviral medicine should be started within 48 hours of the onset of flu symptoms.

Antibiotics do not treat the flu. As with a cold, the virus has to run its course. The goal then, is to minimize discomfort and prevent complications. Generally, you can treat the flu on your own. (If you have trouble breathing, a persistent cough, or cough up yellow-green sputum, however, call a doctor; you may be developing pneumonia.)

## Try these tips to minimize discomfort:

- Rest and drink plenty of liquids. They’ll soothe your throat, relieve nasal congestion, and replace bodily fluids lost through perspiration caused by fever.

- Gargle with warm salt water (1/4 teaspoon of salt in 1/2 cup of water) or 1 tablespoon of hot water mixed with 1 tablespoon of mouthwash.
- Suck on lozenges or hard candies to lubricate your throat. (Don't give these to children under age 5.)
- Don't suppress a cough that brings up mucus. (In other words, avoid cough suppressant medicines.) Ask your pharmacist for an over-the-counter expectorant medicine with guifenesin. If mucus is bloody, yellow, or green, contact your physician for advice.
- Wash your hands often, especially after blowing your nose and before handling food. (This also helps you avoid spreading the flu virus to others.) Keep your hands away from your nose, eyes, and mouth.
- Take an over-the-counter medicine for fever and/or muscle aches. (**Note:** Aspirin should not be given to children under 19 years old, however, when they have chicken pox or flu-like symptoms, as it has been linked to an increased risk of Reye's syndrome, a potentially fatal condition that is discussed in [chapter 2, Major Medical Conditions: Prevention, Detection, and Treatment.](#))

If the symptoms persist despite self-care efforts, see a doctor.