Reliable steps for staying on your feet

Your healthy choices begin before cold and flu season.

There's still no cure for the common cold or flu, but there are definitely things you can do to minimise the impact of these illnesses on your life. Let's break those strategies down into three parts:

1. Strengthen your immune system
2. Practice strong germ defence
3. Take care of yourself if you do get sick

Strengthen your immune system

A healthy immune system is more capable of fighting off a virus, or at least reducing the length or severity of the bout of cold or flu. Here are a few of the many things that go into building a strong immune system, including proper nutrition and exercise:

- **Manage stress.** Studies have shown that people experiencing stress have weakened immune systems and are more likely to catch a cold than those who aren't stressed.[1]
- **Get enough sleep.** Don't let yourself be run down and exhausted. Sleep is vitally important to a healthy immune system. Try to get at least seven hours of sleep a night, especially going into cold and flu season.
- **Don't smoke.** Cigarette smoke can irritate your airways and increase your susceptibility to colds and other infections. Even exposure to second-hand smoke can make you more vulnerable to colds.
- **Stay hydrated.** Drinking lots of water can bolster your immune system. Try avoiding drinks with lots of sugar (like sports drinks, soft drinks, and fruit juices).

Practice strong germ defence

The World Health Organization suggests that one of the most effective germ defence against the flu is your annual vaccination.[2] In addition to a flu vaccination, adopt these sensible *Germ Defence!* habits:

- **Wash your hands often.** Frequent hand washing with hot water and soap helps get rid of most germs you might pick up from touching surfaces used by other people.

- **Avoid touching your face,** especially your nose, mouth and eye areas if you are around someone with a cold or have been touching surfaces in a public area.
- **Keep household and workplace surfaces clean.** Be sure to wipe surfaces and objects with a disinfectant solution.
- **Use paper towels** in the kitchen and bathroom when drying your hands. Germs can live for several hours on cloth towels. At home, use separate towels for each family member to minimise the transmission of viruses.
- **Throw tissues away after use.** Used tissues hold viruses that can contaminate any surface where they are left.
- **Ventilate your home.** Research shows that airflow and ventilation can significantly affect how diseases are spread indoors. After a cough or sneeze, some viruses stay suspended in the air for hours. Keeping your space ventilated helps eliminate conditions where these viruses (and bacteria) thrive.

Keep in mind you may live in a geographical area where your risks for getting the flu are low. Be sure to talk to your health care provider to determine if the flu vaccination is right for you.

Taking care of yourself if you do get sick

Whether you are sick with the flu or a cold, over-the-counter medication such as decongestants, acetaminophen, and cough syrups may help relieve congestion, aches, and other symptoms you might experience. Some people take natural remedies, such as zinc, vitamin C or Echinacea; however, studies haven't yet conclusively confirmed whether these remedies can prevent or reduce the symptoms or length of your cold.[3,4,5]

There are also lifestyle and home remedies to make yourself as comfortable as possible when you get sick:

- **Drink plenty of fluids.** Water, juice, clear broth or warm lemon water are good choices. Try avoiding liquids that may dehydrate you, like alcohol.
- **Eat soup.** Soup and other warm fluids can be soothing and can help loosen your congestion.
- **Rest.** If you have a fever or a bad cough, stay home. This will give you a chance to rest, as well as reduce the chances you'll pass the virus to others.
- **Adjust your room's temperature and humidity.** Keep your room warm, but not overheated. If the air is dry, a humidifier or vaporiser can moisten the air and help ease your congestion and coughing.
- **Soothe your throat.** A saltwater gargle — 1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon of salt dissolved in a glass of warm water — can temporarily relieve your sore or scratchy throat.
- **Use saline nasal drops** to help relieve your nasal congestion.

While there is not much a doctor can do for a routine cold or flu, if you're doing all the right things but are still not feeling better (or even feeling worse), you should definitely call your healthcare provider. In general, you should call your doctor if you have:

- A fever greater than 38.5 C
- A fever lasting five days or more
- A fever that returns after a fever-free period
- Shortness of breath
- Wheezing
- Severe sore throat, headache or sinus pain
- Your condition doesn't improve or seems to get worse

1. AGE, "Stress, ageing and their influence on functional, cellular and molecular aspects of the immune system," June 2014
2. World Health Organization, "Influenza (Seasonal): Fact sheet," November 2016
3. Archives of Otolaryngology—Head & Neck Surgery, "The Bradford Hill criteria and zinc-induced anosmia: a causality analysis," July 2010
4. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, "Vitamin C for preventing and treating the common cold," January 2013
5. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, "Echinacea for preventing and treating the common cold," February 2014

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