

# Colds and Flu

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## Overview

*Nearly everyone has had a cold or flu. While being sick is no fun, generally we get well quickly and the illness is not a major disruption. Recently, however, the public has become increasingly aware of the seriousness of some strains of the flu, and everyone is interested in minimizing the risks posed by influenza.*

## For Discussion

When you get the sniffles, do you know whether you have a cold or the flu? A cold is a mild infection of the upper respiratory passages caused by any one of a variety of viruses. A cold may last a week, and symptoms include a stuffy/runny nose, cough, and sore throat. A person with a cold will not usually have a headache, fever, or muscle aches, while a person with the flu will have severe aches and fatigue. Symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea do not usually accompany a cold, but may accompany the flu. A person with the flu will likely also have a high fever.

The flu can be quite serious and can cause death. More often, however, it is simply unpleasant and an inconvenience. The seasonal flu is a disease caused by influenza virus and is contracted by breathing droplets that have been sneezed or coughed into the air by someone with the flu, or by having the droplets land on the surface of your eye, or even by touching a contaminated surface and then touching your eyes, nose, or mouth. There are a number of ways you can prevent the spread of the flu:

- Get an annual flu shot, and make sure your family members get them, too. There are very few risks associated with being vaccinated for influenza, and it greatly reduces your chances of catching the flu.
- Wash your hands frequently or use hand sanitizer. Twenty seconds of hand washing with warm water helps remove bacteria and viruses from your hands. Remember to wash before and after eating, after using the bathroom, after coughing or sneezing, and after touching surfaces that may have been contaminated by other people.
- Cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze. If possible, bury your face in the corner of your elbow.
- Keep shared surfaces clean. Doorknobs, light switches, telephones, keyboards, tools, and any other surface can become contaminated with all kinds of bacteria and viruses. Regular cleaning and disinfecting of these surfaces can help.
- If you get sick, **stay home**. Don't risk spreading your illness to coworkers. You'll also get better faster if you are well rested. Wait to return to work for the recommended amount of time, or until you no longer have a fever and your cough is improving.

You may be familiar with the term “pandemic.” If an influenza virus changes and becomes a new strain that people are generally not immune to, and the new strain is easily spread, many people around the world could become quite ill. This is referred to as an influenza pandemic. Influenza pandemics have occurred about three times per century.

## Questions

1. What are some differences between colds and the flu?
2. How do you catch the flu? More importantly, how can you **not** catch the flu?