

Cold & Influenza (“Flu”) Viruses

Cold and influenza (“flu”) viruses are spread through the air when an infected individual coughs or sneezes on you or transfers the virus to something you touch. For instance, if a person coughs, sneezes, or wipes his nose with his hands, the virus could be transferred to anything he touches. That’s why hand washing is so important. Or, if a person blows her nose in a tissue and leaves it on a desk or table, the virus can be transferred to the desk or table (as well as the tissue, of course). That’s why it is important to always throw used tissues in the trash and to use disposable tissue and paper towels when possible. It is also wise to use individual hand and bath towels during times of illness, rather than sharing them.

Viruses are more easily transferred/transmitted through mucous membranes (the wet/moist parts of the body), so it is important to keep your hands clean and away from your eyes, nose, and mouth as much as possible. Additionally, some viruses can live from 20 minutes to 2 hours or more on surfaces (e.g., tables, desks, doorknobs, toys).¹ It is a good idea to clean and disinfect door knobs, light switches, telephone receivers, and other commonly shared objects. And, of course, one of the best ways to prevent the flu virus is to get the seasonal flu shot or flu mist each year. It builds up your body’s immunity to the flu without actually having to get the flu!

Call your doctor to ensure the best course of treatment can be started early. Get plenty of rest. Stay hydrated with lots of clear fluids. Wash your hands with warm, soapy water after coughing, sneezing, or blowing your nose, or use an antibacterial hand sanitizer if soap and water are unavailable. Place used tissues in the trash. Limit your exposure to other people. Know your medicine options.²

There is no “cure” for cold and flu viruses, but there are over-the-counter (OTC) medicines that can

help relieve symptoms. There are also **prescription** (i.e., you must see your doctor for these medicines) antiviral medicines for the flu. If treated within the first few days after the virus is contracted, these prescription medicines can reduce the number of days you have the flu.

Sources

1. Centers for Disease Control (2004). Stopping germs at home, work, and school [on-line]. Retrieved August 3, 2009. From http://cdc.gov/germstopper/home_work_school.htm.
2. U.S. Food and Drug Administration (2008). Get set for winter illness season [on-line]. Retrieved September 10, 2009. From <http://www.fda.gov/downloads/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/UCM143453.pdf>.

