



Colds and the flu are always miserable experiences. You know the symptoms— sneezing, scratchy throat, runny nose, nasal congestion, watery eyes. Are you getting a cold? But what if you also have a fever, headache, fatigue, muscle aches and chills? Then you might have the flu, which is much more serious. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that as many as 49,000 people die from the flu or flu-like illness each year.

Whether it's the cold or flu, getting either of them is never fun. Adults can average two to four colds each year, and children can catch between six and eight. Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could avoid a cold or the flu in the first place? Well, here are some common, simple cold and flu basics to help you protect yourself and your family from getting sick.

Get a Flu Shot!

The CDC says that the best way to protect yourself against the flu is to get a flu shot vaccination each year. Everyone 6 months of age and older should receive it. While there are many different flu viruses, the vaccine will protect against those that research indicates will be most common during that year. Yearly vaccinations should begin in September or as soon as the vaccine is available.

Prevent Colds and Flu with Frequent Handwashing

Your best protection from the common cold and flu is frequent handwashing. Both flu and cold viruses are transmitted the same way—through microscopic droplets from an infected person's respiratory system. Someone sneezes or coughs, and droplets are sprayed onto any nearby surface—including you! If people cough or sneeze into their hands (without a tissue), they can

contaminate every surface they touch. If you touch that same surface, you pick up the virus. If you rub your eyes or nose, you've just infected yourself. About 80% of contagious diseases are transmitted in this manner. The simple friction that occurs when you rub skin against skin while using warm water and soap followed by thorough rinsing and drying can get rid of most potentially harmful germs. While germs are often transferred to through household objects—telephones, doorknobs, toothbrushes, and faucet handles—the biggest transportation center for germs is your hands. That's why frequent handwashing gets rid of the illness-causing germs and helps to prevent the spread of some diseases—especially if a family member, friend or co-worker has a cold or flu virus.

The CDC says the simple act of hand washing is the single most important means of preventing the spread of viral and bacterial infections. Yet some studies reveal that many Americans using public restrooms don't wash their hands before leaving. People also forget to wash their hands before preparing meals, and they grab snacks without thinking of washing their hands beforehand. If you want to help prevent colds and flu, just stop—and wash your hands.

Guidelines on How to Most Effectively Wash Your Hands

- Use lots of warm, running water and liquid soap to lather your hands and wrists. Avoid bar soap, which can harbor viruses and bacteria.
- Scrub hands for at least 15 seconds, about the length of time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday" twice.
- Rinse hands well with your hands pointing down so the rinse water doesn't run up your arms.
- Dry hands with an air dryer or a disposable paper towel—germs can live for hours on hand towels.
- Shut off the faucet using your elbows or a paper towel as a barrier, so you don't have to touch the handle.
- Use a paper towel to open the door of the washing facility when you leave it.

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Everyday Actions to Prevent the Spread of Germs That Cause Colds and Flu

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Cover your nose and mouth when coughing and sneezing. Cough and sneeze into a tissue or into your hands. Wash your hands afterward with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- No tissue? When you cough, turn your head away from others.
- If you have a sudden sneeze, bend your arm and sneeze into it.
- Don't touch your eyes, nose or mouth with your hands.
- Disinfect any shared surfaces (like phones, keyboards, doorknobs, steering wheels) frequently. Viruses can live on surfaces for several hours.
- Stay away from crowds during cold and flu season.
- Get plenty of sleep and manage your stress levels. Lack of sleep and high levels of stress can reduce immune functioning, thus lowering the body's ability to fend off colds and flu. Your body's immune system does its best work while you're sleeping.
- Stay hydrated. Drink plenty of water and avoid alcohol and caffeine, which can be dehydrating.
- Use a lotion or moisturizing cream to prevent cracks in the skin that can provide an entry point for germs.
- Be physically active by maintaining a moderate exercise program 3 – 4 days a week. It will strengthen the immune system and increase the body's natural ability to fight infection.
- Eat healthy, nutritious food; 5 – 9 servings per day of fruit and vegetables is recommended.

By following these simple actions, you can maintain your immunity and prevent the spread of cold and flu germs to yourself.