

What you should know about: Protecting Yourself During the Cold and Flu Season

(Respiratory infections)

What are respiratory infections?

Influenza (flu) and the cold are called respiratory infections because they affect the nose, throat, and lungs. Respiratory infections also include diseases such as whooping cough, measles, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), and tuberculosis. Germs called bacteria and viruses cause these infections.

Who is likely to get respiratory infections?

Everyone is at risk. In the United States, most colds, flu cases, and other respiratory infections occur during the fall and winter. The seasonal variation may relate to the opening of schools and to cold weather, which prompt people to spend more time indoors and increase the chances that germs will spread from person to person.

However, the very young, the very old, those with long-term (chronic) diseases, or with weak immune systems are more likely to get these infections.

How are respiratory diseases spread?

The germs that cause respiratory infections are spread from person-to-person by very small droplets that are sent through the air when a sick person coughs, sneezes, and talks. Some viruses can also be spread when a person touches a surface with the virus on it (for example, a door handle) and then touches his or her nose or mouth. Most people are able to spread viruses to others for a day or two before they show signs of the disease. This is why it is always important to cover a cough or sneeze.

How do I protect myself from catching germs?

“Respiratory etiquette” is the newest phrase in healthcare circles, and refers to taking common-sense steps to prevent the spread of germs from person to person.

Washing your hands thoroughly and often is the most important way you can prevent catching germs and spreading germs to others and prevent many communicable diseases. Use warm water and soap and scrub your hands for about 20 seconds. Dry your hands with a clean, disposable towel.

Use an alcohol-based hand cleaner when soap and water are not available.

To prevent catching germs from others you should:

- Wash your hands before eating, or touching your eyes, nose, or mouth.
- Wash your hands after touching anyone who is sneezing, coughing, or blowing nose, or has a runny nose. This is true especially if you are taking care of someone ill.
- Wash your hands after using the restroom.
- Not share towels, lipstick, toys, cigarettes, food, eating utensils, drinking glasses, or anything else that might be contaminated with respiratory germs.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Avoid when possible closed, crowded spaces.

How do I protect others from catching germs?

- Wash hands often when you are sick.
- Cover your mouth and nose with tissue every time you sneeze, blow your nose, or cough. Do not use handkerchiefs.
- Put used tissues into the nearest trash can after using.
- If you do not have a tissue, use your sleeve to cover your mouth and nose. Do not use your bare hands.
- Always wash your hands after sneezing, blowing your nose, or coughing, or after touching used tissues.
- When visiting your doctor or clinic, notify the receptionist if you have a fever with cough or rash. They may ask you to wear a mask or wait in a separate area.
- Stay home if you have a cough and fever. Keep away from family members that are very young, very old, or have a serious disease or weak immune system.
- Because cold viruses can survive for hours outside the body, cleaning surfaces with a virus-killing disinfectant (such as a 1 part household bleach to nine parts water solution) might help prevent spread of infection.

Will vaccines and medications protect me from respiratory infections?

The flu shot. When the flu shots are in short supply, healthcare workers will give priority to those who are at high risk from suffering complications after getting the flu. People who should **always** get a yearly flu shot include infants, people over 65 years of age, those with a long-term illness or weak immune system, and those who work with ill patients. Remember, the flu shot is not 100% effective, some people still get the flu even after getting the shot.

Nasal (spray) flu vaccine and antiviral drugs. A doctor can determine if you need the nasal flu vaccine and antiviral drugs. The nasal flu vaccine is used only for healthy children, adolescents, and adults, aged 5 to 49. In the event of a viral outbreak in a home, institution, or community, your doctor may choose to give antiviral drugs to you as a precaution, especially if you are at high risk for complications, such as pneumonia.

What if I think I have a respiratory infection?

Contact your doctor or clinic if you fall into any of the risk groups for developing complications, especially if you have chronic lung problems.

How are respiratory infections treated?

Antiviral drugs. There are several antiviral drugs available for treatment. A doctor will need to evaluate your case to decide if these are right for you. Antiviral agents should not be confused with antibiotics, which are only effective against bacteria.

Antibiotics. Antibiotics only help fight respiratory illnesses that are caused by bacteria. The flu and colds cannot be cured with antibiotics because they are caused by viruses. Antibiotics do not kill viruses. If you are given an antibiotic by a doctor to fight a respiratory infection caused by bacteria, follow the doctor's instructions carefully, finish all medication, and do not share these medications.

Over-the-counter medications. Your doctor, clinic, or pharmacist can advise you on which over-the-counter medications may relieve symptoms. If your child or teenager has flu-like symptoms or a fever, do not give them aspirin without speaking to the child's doctor first.

People who do not suffer complications from these diseases should use common sense and follow age-old advice by getting plenty of rest, drinking a lot of liquids, and avoiding using alcohol and tobacco. Seek medical help as soon as possible if you have difficulty breathing or have a high fever of 101° F.

Should I be concerned if I am exposed to respiratory infections during pregnancy?

Pregnant women are understandably concerned about being exposed to respiratory germs and the effect they may have on the baby. The risk to the baby depends on the gestational (in-the-womb) age of the baby, the type of virus, and the immune condition of the mother. Although babies may be harmed by these germs, the overall risk for the baby when the mother is exposed is very small. Some germs, like the rubella virus, are known to cause birth defects, but the diseases are rare. Other respiratory germs are more common, but either the mother is already immune to the disease or the disease is not likely to affect the baby. Possible outcomes range from no harm to the baby to premature birth to an infection after delivery.

Use all common-sense precautions previously listed. Remember that a woman is more likely to be exposed at home or if they work in a daycare center or a place where people are often sick. So make sure your family follows basic hygienic steps –including handwashing and "respiratory etiquette"- and that your workplace has a plan to avoid the spread of germs and disease.

Health experts recommend that women get the flu shot if they will be in their second or third trimester of pregnancy during the flu season (usually October through May.)

Call you doctor or clinic if you have concerns after being exposed. Seek medical advice if you have been exposed to chickenpox, rubella, or fifth disease. There are blood tests to determine if you are already immune to these diseases.

Seek medical help as soon as possible if you have difficulty breathing, lasting chest pain, severe sore throat, or have a high fever of 101° F. Since many over-the-counter medications and herbal remedies have ingredients that have not been tested for safety during pregnancy, make sure to talk to your doctor, clinic, or pharmacist before taking these. For infections caused by bacteria, there are many antibiotics which are safe to take during pregnancy, but make sure the doctor knows you are pregnant ahead of time.