

FDA shares advice to avoid colds and flu

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Influenza virus is spread by sneezing, talking and touching contaminated surfaces.

(HealthDay)—Viral infections can happen at any time, but they're more common during winter when people spend more time in close contact with others indoors.

Although most respiratory viruses clear up within a few days, some can lead to dangerous complications, particularly for smokers, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration reports. Signs of complications include: a cough that interrupts sleep; persistent, high fever; chest pain; or shortness of breath.

Unlike colds, the flu comes on suddenly and lasts more than a few days. Each year, more than 200,000 people in the United States are hospitalized from [flu complications](#), and thousands die from flu, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In the United States, flu season peaks between December and February.

Although colds and the flu share some signs, the flu can lead to more serious symptoms, including fever, headache, chills, dry cough, body aches and fatigue. Influenza can also cause nausea and vomiting among [young children](#), the FDA said in a news release.

The [flu virus](#) is spread through droplets from coughing, sneezing and talking. It can also infect surfaces.

The best way to protect yourself from the flu is to get vaccinated every year, the FDA said. Flu viruses are constantly changing so the vaccines must be updated annually. The [flu vaccine](#) is available as an injection or a nasal spray.

Although it's best to get the flu vaccine in October, getting it later can still help protect you from the virus, the agency said.

With rare exceptions, everyone 6 months of age and older should be vaccinated against flu, [federal health officials](#) say. Vaccination is especially important for those at greater risk for flu-related complications, including seniors, pregnant women and children younger than 5 years, people with [chronic health conditions](#), [health care providers](#) and caregivers for young children and the elderly.

There is no vaccine for colds. But measures to prevent the spread of viruses include the following:

- Wash your hands frequently. Use soap and water when possible. If necessary, an alcohol-based hand sanitizer can help.
- Avoid exposure to infected people.
- Eat a healthy well-balanced diet.
- Get enough sleep.
- Exercise regularly.
- Ease stress.

If you do get sick, the FDA recommends gargling with salt water to relieve a sore throat and using a cool-mist humidifier to relieve congestion. Call your doctor early on to get treatment advice, and use a tissue to cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze. Also, avoid alcohol and caffeine, which can be dehydrating.

Before taking over-the-counter medications, read all drug labels and directions. If you have certain health issues, such as high blood pressure, talk to your doctor before taking cold or flu medications. Also, don't give over-the-counter medication to children without talking to a pediatrician, the FDA advises.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has [winter health and safety tips](#).

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