

What is the flu?

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Fever, upset stomach, diarrhea, sore throat, chills, coughing, sneezing and headache all can make you feel miserable. And when you're not feeling well, it sometimes can be hard to know exactly what's wrong and how you can help yourself feel better.

With [flu season](#) approaching, this is a good time to look at the symptoms of what is—and is not—the flu.

Common cold

A runny or stuffy nose, sneezing, congestion, headache and [sore throat](#) likely herald the common cold. This viral infection of your nose and throat usually is harmless, although it might not feel that way.

While there's no cure for the common cold, most people get better without treatment—usually within a week to 10 days. Antibiotics aren't effective against viruses, and overusing them can contribute to the development of antibiotic-resistant strains of bacteria.

Lifestyle and home remedies for symptom relief include plenty of fluids and rest. There are pros and cons to commonly used cold remedies, such as over-the-counter pain relievers, decongestants, nasal sprays and cough syrups.

Viral gastroenteritis, or stomach flu

What many people call the flu is actually viral gastroenteritis, or stomach flu. Characteristic symptoms include diarrhea, nausea, and abdominal cramps and pain. Symptoms usually last just a day or two, but occasionally they may persist as long as 10 days.

There's often no specific medical treatment for viral gastroenteritis. Self-care measures can help with symptom relief, though. Get plenty of rest and let your stomach settle by avoiding solid foods for a few hours. Instead, suck on ice chips or take small sips of water. Then ease back into eating with a bland diet. If nausea returns, stop eating again. Avoid foods such as dairy products, caffeine, and fatty or highly seasoned

foods until you feel better.

Influenza

Influenza is the true flu. It's is a viral infection that attacks your respiratory system, including your nose, throat and lungs. At first, the flu may seem like a common cold with a [runny nose](#), sneezing and sore throat. But colds usually develop slowly; whereas, the flu tends to come on suddenly. And although a cold can be a bother, you usually feel much worse with the flu.

For most people, the flu resolves on its own. But sometimes the flu and its complications can be deadly. People at higher risk of developing flu complications include young children, [pregnant woman](#) and those two weeks postpartum, people over 65, people with weakened immune systems and some chronic illnesses, and people who are obese.

Usually, you'll need nothing more than rest and plenty of fluids to treat the flu. But if you have a severe infection or are at higher risk of complications, your health care provider may prescribe an antiviral drug to treat the flu.

Unlike the common cold and [stomach flu](#), there is a vaccine for the flu. While it's not 100% effective, getting vaccinated for the flu can reduce your risk of becoming infected with the flu, and lessen its severity and lower your risk of hospitalization if you are infected. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends a yearly flu vaccine for everyone 6 months and older, with rare exceptions. Vaccination is your best defense against the flu.

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