

Tips for treating the flu at home

October 13 2022, by Angela Nelson



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

It's flu season, during which approximately 30 million Americans will get the flu, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Fortunately, most of those cases don't require medical attention and can be treated at home with remedies such as over the counter (OTC) medication and common kitchen staples.

Physician Tuhin Roy is an associate medical director at Greater

Lawrence Family Health Center and clinical assistant professor of family medicine at Tufts University School of Medicine. He sees many cases of the flu—and other viruses with flu-like symptoms—in adult and child patients at the health center's busy clinics each year.

"First off, know when it's appropriate to treat the flu at home and when to see a doctor," Roy says. "If someone is short of breath, having difficulty breathing, experiencing chest pain, or unable to eat or drink, it is an indication to seek medical care."

Roy, who completed his residency at the Tufts-affiliated Lawrence Family Medicine Residency and is now one of the program's faculty leaders, recently shared his best advice for how to relieve flu symptoms while riding out the virus at home.

Take acetaminophen or ibuprofen two or three times a day unless there's an allergy or other reason not to. These OTC medicine cabinet staples won't fix everything, but they will lessen muscle aches, headaches, and the overall crummy feeling of the flu.

Try kitchen medicine. Studies have shown that honey is effective when it comes to improving respiratory symptoms quickly. "Warm tea with honey and lemon can soothe a [sore throat](#) and help with decongestion, and it's better than most of the medicines out there," he says, but don't give honey to children under one year old.

Use steam for stuffiness. For heavy congestion, steam showers or holding your head over a hot pot of water can open nasal passages. Saline sprays, saline irrigation, and other OTC nasal decongestants also can reduce symptoms.

Get some rest. Sleep deprivation will make the flu get worse a lot faster, says Roy. Getting a good night's sleep will give your body the best tools

possible to fight off the flu.

Stay hydrated. "Drinking a lot of fluids all at once can be difficult with the flu because it can cause nausea and make people feel worse," Roy says. "I recommend putting a timer on your phone, and every 15 minutes, take two or three sips. That's all you need to stay hydrated throughout the day."

Watch for symptoms in children. Children often stop eating or drinking much sooner than adults when they feel ill. Acetaminophen or ibuprofen can help reduce fevers, which in turn can help make kids feel like drinking fluids again. "For babies, make sure they're having at least four wet diapers a day, and toddlers or older kids should be urinating several times a day," he cautions.

Kids often will not want milk or milk-type products, like formula, so Roy recommends just water or a 50/50 mix of apple juice and water, which contains some electrolytes and nutrients.

Get a flu shot. The best way to prevent the need for any of this is to get a [flu shot](#), Roy says, and there are very few reasons not to get one. They're effective and safe, but because the flu virus changes, people should get an influenza vaccination every year. He recommends them for children starting at six months old.

"One of the most common things I hear from people is, 'I get the flu shot, and I get the flu anyway, so what's the point?'" says Roy. "The point is that the flu shot helps prevent severe symptoms, like ending up in the hospital, which can happen more often in kids and immunocompromised people. So, it might be true that you'll still get the flu, but it'll be less intense than what it would be without the vaccination."

Eat nutritiously. Good nutrition can be very helpful, and for people who haven't been eating well, a vitamin supplement like vitamin C might be beneficial, he says.

While there are [herbal products](#) on the market that claim to be able to shorten the duration of the flu, nothing has been proven with evidence, Roy says. However, one herbal product that has shown promise is uncka, a plant native to South Africa and used in African medicine. [Studies have shown](#) it has the potential to reduce the severity and duration of flu-like symptoms.

"One thing I don't recommend is zinc," he says. "Over-the-counter zinc [nasal sprays](#) and tablets can cause side effects such as nausea, vomiting, and the sprays in particular can reduce the sense of smell for a prolonged period of time."

Don't expect a magic cure. "There is no medicine for cutting short the flu significantly," says Roy. "The flu is a virus, so antibiotics wouldn't be helpful. For the vast majority of people, I recommend staying home and doing some of these kitchen remedies."

In some cases—young children, pregnant people, the elderly, or other people with significant medical issues—a physician may prescribe an antiviral medication specifically for the flu, but Roy stresses that this medication has side effects and is meant only for people who are extremely high risk.

Provided by Tufts University

Citation: Tips for treating the flu at home (2022, October 13) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-10-flu-home.html>

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