How long do colds and flu last?

Severity of the symptoms and length of the infection depends on the individual. The temperature you get with flu usually goes down within 48 hours.

The worst flu or cold symptoms will be over in 4-5 days but complete recovery can take up to 10 days, and sometimes longer. There is no 'cure' but you can treat the symptoms with some practical self help measures and over the counter medicines. Your pharmacist can advise you on what is best for you.

Day 1-2 If you have flu this is the time when you will have a high temperature and symptoms that come on quickly. You will be shivering with a headache, muscle aches in the back and legs and you may feel dizzy. The high temperature should go down within 48 hours.

If you have a cold, this is the incubation stage and there are no symptoms to tell you that you have been infected.

What's happening to your body?
A good sneeze can travel the length of a bus or tube carriage and you have inhaled infected droplets. The virus has got past your body's first line of defence – the hairs and mucus in the nose, which traps them – or you have introduced them by touching your nose or eyes after being in contact with someone with a cold or flu. The virus is taking over your cells and using them to reproduce by the million.

What you can do
Get plenty of rest, preferably in bed. Drink plenty of fluids. You could take paracetamol or ibuprofen to reduce your temperature and ease aches and pains.

Day 2-3 If you have flu your temperature should be dropping now and from here on your symptoms will be similar to those you get with colds.

If you have a cold, the first signs appear on day 2 with a tickle or soreness in the nose and/or throat and sometimes in the eyes. The sore throat gets worse and a dry cough might start. You start sneezing and your nose starts to run.

Usually with a cold adults do not get a high temperature, although children may do.

What's happening to your body?
Cells in the nose and throat release chemicals to defend you against the virus. These chemicals irritate the cells and cause itchiness and soreness and make you sneeze. By now a large number of cells have been killed off by the virus and the nose produces a watery mucus to wash them out. Mounting the counter-attack against the virus takes a lot out of you, and you will feel tired and unwell.

What you can do
It's probably best to stay at home to avoid spreading your cold to others. Take it easy and rest if possible. Keep warm, and keep the atmosphere moist.

Drink plenty of fluids, as you will lose a lot through mucus production and possibly perspiration. You could take paracetamol or ibuprofen to reduce your temperature. If your throat is very sore take a cough lozenge or use a spray. Avoid smoking, as it will further irritate the throat and the lining of the nose.

Day 3-5 The discharge from the nose may change from clear and watery to thicker and yellowish in colour.

Your nose starts to feel very stuffy and blocked up, and you might get pain in the forehead and around and behind the eyes. If the infection is a really nasty one adults may still have a slight fever.

What's happening to your body?
Catarrh is a mixture of mucus and white blood cells produced to fight off infections. It drips down the nasal passage into the nose causing a phlegmy, chesty cough as the body tries to get rid of the catarrh. The tissues in the windpipe also get congested, so that air passes through less easily and you could become wheezy.

What you can do
Continue with the fluids. You can take paracetamol or ibuprofen if you still have a temperature. Use steam inhalations to liquefy mucus in the nose and chest and help get rid of it.

A cough is a normal function of the body as it tries to get rid of phlegm. It can be relieved with a cool drink but if it continues to be troublesome, a range of cough mixtures are available. Sleep with your head on a high pillow if your nose is stuffed up at night.

Day 5–14+ Symptoms usually start to subside.

What's happening to your body?
The virus has been defeated. It is now just a matter of time until things get back to normal. But it may be a couple of weeks until the catarrh has all gone, the coughing stops and the swollen tissues in the nose and chest shrink down again.

What you can do
Go back to your normal activities. Keep on with medication if you need to until the symptoms have gone completely.

This leaflet is available to download from www.pagb.co.uk and www.rcgp.org.uk

Know your enemy – what are colds and flu?

Colds and flu are the most common of all infections; on average every adult can expect to get two colds a year, and children can get up to 10 colds a year before they develop immunity. Flu is less common. Some people think they have flu when they just have a heavy cold – the symptoms are similar.

Most colds and flu happen between September and March.

What causes colds and flu?

Colds and flu are both virus infections. Colds are caused by over 100 viruses, too many to develop a vaccine. Flu is caused by a relatively small number of viruses and vaccines have been developed to help prevent it.

Pandemic flu and swine flu

Pandemic flu is the name for a kind of flu that happens outside the normal season and all over the world at the same time.

Swine flu is the term that is being used for this pandemic flu because it started in pigs and crossed over to humans. H1N1 is also a commonly used term for this flu virus.

Symptoms

You have probably got flu if you have a sudden high temperature (more than 38 degrees Celsius) and a sudden cough along with some of the following symptoms:

- headache
- chills
- aching muscles
- limb or joint pain
- sore throat
- runny nose
- sneezing
- loss of appetite
- diarrhoea or stomach upset

Be prepared

If you get flu you won't feel like going out so be prepared.

- Establish 'flu friends' - friends and relatives who can help if you fall ill.
- Keep paracetamol or ibuprofen based pain and fever treatments or cold remedies in the house.
- Have a digital thermometer available so you can check your temperature if needed.

When do I need to see a doctor?

Contact your doctor if you think you have flu and you have a serious underlying illness; you are pregnant; you have a sick child under one year old; your condition suddenly gets much worse or your condition is still getting worse after seven days (or five days for a child).

Vaccination

The normal flu vaccination you may have had last year will not stop you getting swine flu. Unfortunately the flu virus changes or mutates every year and vaccines stop being effective. A vaccine to treat the current flu virus is in development. Check for the current position at **www.NHS.uk**

Antibiotics

Antibiotics have no effect on viruses so there is no point in trying to get some from your doctor to cure a cold or flu. There is also a risk you could spread the infection to other patients while visiting the doctor's surgery.

Antivirals

Antivirals are not a cure, but they may help you to recover by relieving certain symptoms, reducing the length of time you are ill by around one day, and reducing the potential for serious complications, such as pneumonia. You have to take them within 48 hours of developing symptoms – contact the flu helpline on **0800 1 513 513**

OTC medicines

As well as paracetamol and ibuprofen based cold remedies, a range of medicines are available over the counter. These may relieve a sore throat, treat the cough and help your blocked nose. Your pharmacist can advise you on what treatment is best for you and your family.

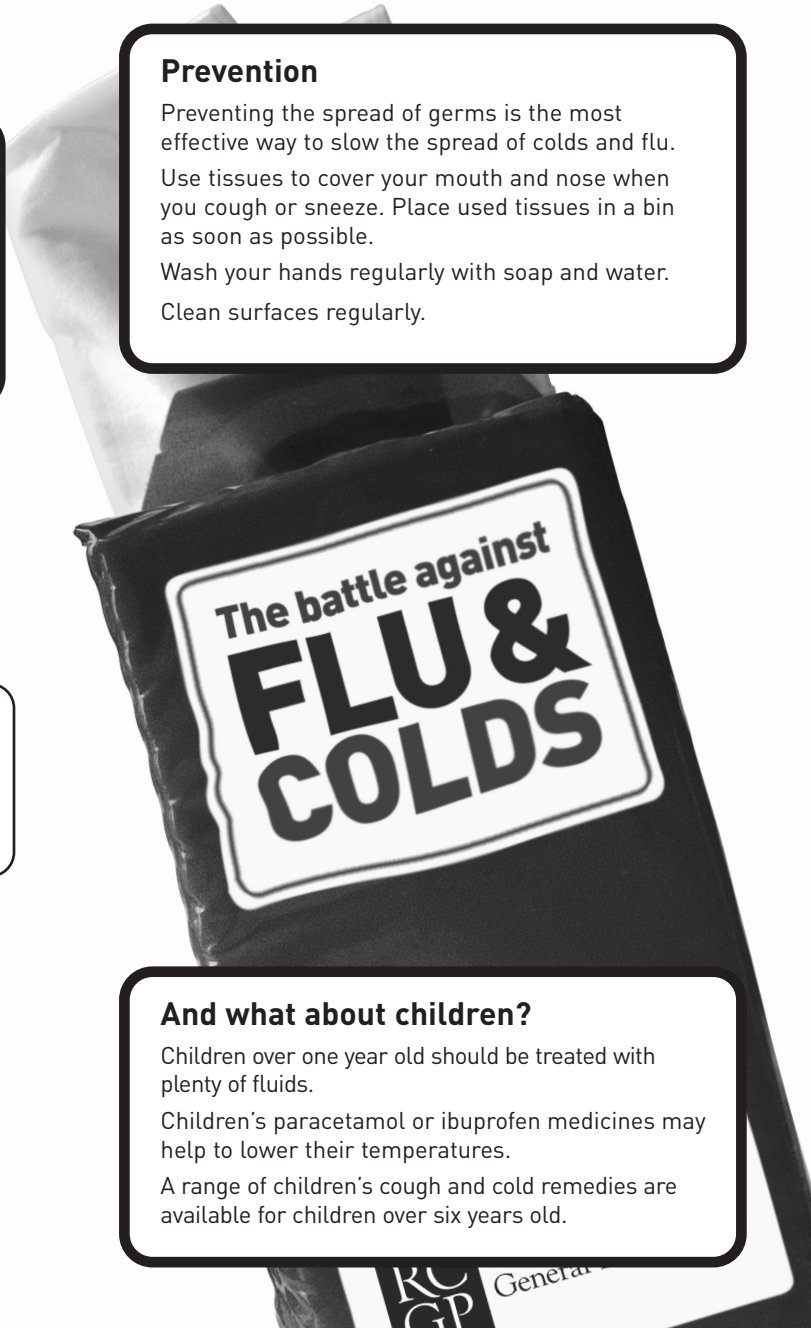
Prevention

Preventing the spread of germs is the most effective way to slow the spread of colds and flu.

Use tissues to cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze. Place used tissues in a bin as soon as possible.

Wash your hands regularly with soap and water.

Clean surfaces regularly.



And what about children?

Children over one year old should be treated with plenty of fluids.

Children's paracetamol or ibuprofen medicines may help to lower their temperatures.

A range of children's cough and cold remedies are available for children over six years old.