



*Viruses—not bacteria—cause colds, flu, and chest colds. Antibiotics kill only bacteria. Antibiotics do not kill viruses, so they do not work for colds or flu.*

Colds, flu, and chest colds (bronchitis) are common. In fact, many adults get three to four colds a year. The good news is that most people begin to feel better within a week or two. However, some symptoms, including a cough, can sometimes last up to three weeks.

We now know that antibiotics will not cure a cold, flu, or chest cold. On the other hand, over-the-counter medicines (like decongestants or cough drops) and home remedies may help ease symptoms while your body heals itself.

## Prevention

Here are some other tips that may help prevent getting a cold or the flu in the first place:

- Prevent catching a virus that can cause a cold or the flu by washing your hands often or using alcohol-based hand gel, not touching your face, and sneezing into your elbow.
- Eat a healthy diet, exercise regularly, manage your stress, and get plenty of rest.
- Everyone should get a yearly flu shot in October or November, but they are especially recommended for:
  - all children 6 months to 18 years (most important for children 6 months to 5 years old)
  - anyone 50 or older
  - anyone with a chronic condition (such as asthma or heart disease)
  - pregnant women
  - health care workers
  - anyone living with someone in one of these categories or a child less than 6 months old

A flu shot is generally safe and effective in preventing the flu. It will not make you sick and has a very low rate of side effects.

If you have a severe allergy to eggs, discuss the flu shot with your physician.

If you have a chronic condition, such as asthma, diabetes, sickle cell disease, cystic fibrosis, lung problems, seizure disorder, developmental delay, kidney disease, or congenital heart disease, please take extra care to maintain your health during the cold and flu season. Complications from colds or flu may be more severe for you.

## Home remedies can help ease your symptoms

### General relief

- Get extra rest. You can return to work, but slow down and try to take it easy.
- Drink lots of fluids (at least 8 to 10 glasses a day). Hot herbal tea, warm water, or chicken soup are especially good for congestion (runny or stuffy nose).
- Take acetaminophen (such as Tylenol) or ibuprofen (such as Advil) for fever or body aches.
- If you smoke, this is a good time to quit. Ask your doctor or other medical professional how. Avoid other people's smoke. (You will lower your chances of getting sick again.)
- If you are considering an alternative approach, some studies suggest that echinacea may decrease the length and severity of cold symptoms if you take it in the first few days that you experience symptoms. However, studies show that it does not prevent colds or flu.

Herbs and supplements are sold over-the-counter. Kaiser Permanente carries only herb categories for which some evidence exists to show that the herbs may be effective to treat certain medical conditions.

## Runny or stuffy nose

- Keep the inside of your nose moist with a salt-water solution. You can purchase saline nose drops or sprays (such as Ocean Nasal Spray). See your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook* for instructions on how to make a solution at home.
- Breathe warm, moist air from a steamy shower, hot bath, or sink filled with hot water.
- Use a decongestant nose spray like oxymetolazine (such as Afrin). Do not use it for more than three days at a time.
- Take a decongestant, like pseudoephedrine (such as Sudafed). If you have high blood pressure, consult with your doctor before taking pseudoephedrine.
- Apply moist heat (warm towel or gel pack) to your face three to four times a day for five to ten minutes each time.

## Cough

- Use cough drops to soothe irritation. Be sure to drink lots of fluids, as described above.
- Use a cough suppressant containing dextromethorphan (such as Robitussin-DM).

This information is not intended to diagnose or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse any brand name: any similar products may be used.

## Sore throat

- Gargle with warm salt water twice a day. Mix 1 teaspoon of salt in 1 cup of warm water.
- Use a sore throat spray or medicated lozenge such as Chloraseptic or Cepacol.

## Antibiotics will *not* help a simple cold, flu or chest cold

Viruses and bacteria are germs that can make you ill. Viruses—not bacteria—cause colds, flu, and chest colds. Antibiotics kill only bacteria. Antibiotics do not kill viruses, so they do not work for colds or flu.

- You may have used antibiotics before for a cold, flu, or chest cold. They may have *seemed* to work. However, chances are that your body would have recovered just as quickly on its own without them.
- It is common to have yellow or green mucus with a cold. Colored mucus does *not* mean you have a bacterial infection or need antibiotics.

## Using antibiotics that you don't need can hurt you by . . .

- increasing your chances of being infected by bacteria that antibiotics cannot kill.
- causing side effects, like upset stomach, diarrhea, vaginal infection, rashes, and (rarely) life-threatening allergic reactions—even with the same antibiotics that you may have used before without any problems.

## Call Kaiser Permanente if you have ...

- trouble breathing, wheezing or tightness in your chest.
- a deep cough with lots of mucus or a cough that lasts more than three weeks.
- a very sore throat and a hard time swallowing.
- severe ear pain, sudden hearing loss or discharge from the ear.
- a fever with stiff neck or a severe headache
- a fever of 104° F or higher that does not go down after two hours of home treatment, 102° F or higher for one day, 101° F or higher for three days, or 100° F or higher for four days.
- gotten better, then gotten worse again.

## Visit your Kaiser Permanente pharmacy

- Over-the-counter medications are available to ease cold and flu symptoms.
- Kaiser Permanente pharmacies offer a variety of over-the-counter cough medicines as well as alcohol-based hand gel for your convenience. Our pharmacists are available to assist you in selecting the product that best suits your needs.

- Connect to our Web site at [kp.org](http://kp.org) to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.