COUGHS, COLDs AND FLU

Coughs, colds and flu are all contagious viral infections. They are spread by inhaling infected airborne droplets from sneezing, coughing and speaking.

**Coughs** may be wet and productive (coughing up phlegm) or dry and hacking. During a viral infection the nasal discharge and phlegm will be clear, white or yellow in colour. If this changes to a green or brown colour it may indicate the presence of a bacterial infection, which will need to be treated by your doctor.

**Colds** include symptoms such as sore throat, mild fever, runny nose, a cough, general weakness or tiredness.

**Flu or influenza** on the other hand is much more severe and debilitating. Symptoms may include all of the above accompanied by extreme joint and muscular pains, very high temperatures, nausea and vomiting.

**PREVENTION**

- regular exercise, a balanced diet and adequate sleep will help keep your immune system strong.
- regular hand washing can minimise the chance of catching a cold and spreading it to others.
- an annual flu vaccination will help protect you against influenza.

**TREATMENT**

- antibiotics will not help; the best thing to do is to treat the symptoms and let your body recover.
- get plenty of rest and sleep and avoid stress.
- refrain from exercise; you need to give your body a chance to fight the infection.
- if you can, stay home from work or study to avoid spreading the virus.
- drink plenty of fluids - water is best - to replace fluids that you will lose by having a fever.
- avoid caffeine and alcohol.
- keep warm, but do not overdress.
- analgesics such as aspirin or paracetamol will reduce fever, headache and muscular pains:
  - don’t give aspirin to children.
  - follow directions on the packet.
  - avoid if you have stomach problems such as an ulcer or if you have an allergy.
  - do not take aspirin if you have asthma.

**IF YOU’RE SICK – STAY AT HOME!**

Coughs, colds and flu are infectious diseases. Staying at home gives your body the chance to recover and stops you passing your infection onto others.

Make sure you tell someone you’re sick, so they can check on you.

- nasal congestion can be treated with medications such as Sudafed or combined preparations that treat fever, pain, and congestion, such as Codral cold tablets:
  - discuss the best choice and the possible side effects of these medications with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist before using.
- try steam inhalation by putting boiled water in a bowl with a few drops of eucalyptus oil, putting a towel over your head and breathing in the vapours:
  - Effective for clearing your nasal passages; do this for ten minutes and be careful not to burn yourself.
  - Do not use with children.
- use gargles and cough lozenges as these can help soothe a sore throat.

**WHEN TO SEE A HEALTH PROFESSIONAL**

Virtually all upper respiratory tract infections get better without any specific treatment. See the doctor if you or your child:

- refuse to drink fluids.
- vomit frequently.
- complain of intense headache.
- is pale and sleepy.
- has difficulty breathing.
- has a high fever that does not respond to paracetamol.
- shows no improvement in 48 hours.
- shows any other signs that you are worried about.
MORE INFORMATION

See a doctor
A full list of doctors near RMIT is available on the Health Promotion website.
» rmit.edu.au/students/health/clinics

Ask a Health Promoter
Send us an email for confidential advice: myhealth@rmit.edu.au

Phone Nurse on Call
Free health advice from a Registered Nurse 24 hours a day
- 1300 60 60 24

Special Consideration
If you are sick, you may be eligible for Special Consideration.
» rmit.edu.au/students/specialconsideration

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