

PREPARING FOR THE COLD AND FLU SEASON

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It is that time of year again when a dramatic increase in coughs and sniffles appear in schools, workplaces, and homes across the country. A cold or flu can negatively impact our work, productivity and quality of life. In Canada alone, colds and flu account for direct economic losses in the tens of millions of dollars. Proactive and preventative measures are the most effective means of avoiding or minimizing the negative effects of colds and flu. Learn more about cold and flu basics along with which preventative strategies can be significant defenses against them.



Influenza or (the “flu”) and the common cold are viral respiratory infections (they affect the nose, throat, and lungs). Viruses are spread from person to person through airborne droplets that are sneezed out or coughed up by an infected person. In other instances, viruses can also be spread when a person touches an infected surface such as a doorknob, countertop, or telephone, and then touches his or her nose, mouth, eyes, or ears. As a result, these illnesses are most easily spread in crowded public places such as schools, workplaces and grocery stores. People infected with an influenza or cold virus become contagious 24 hours after the virus enters the body and often before symptoms appear. Adults remain infectious (can spread the virus to others) for about 6 days, and children remain infectious for up to 10 days.

Influenza commonly peaks between October and March each year, affecting 10% to 40% of the population. There are three types of influenza viruses: A, B, and C. Type A influenza causes the most serious problems and symptoms in humans. Although most people recover fully, the flu causes approximately 7,000 deaths annually in Canada. Most of these deaths occur in high-risk populations such as the elderly, very young children, and those with serious medical conditions or weakened immune systems.

Over 200 different known cold viruses cause the common cold. Most colds (30% to 40%) are caused by *rhinoviruses*. In Canada, the peak times for colds are at the start of school in the fall, mid-winter, and again in early spring. It is estimated that on average, children catch approximately eight colds per year; adults catch roughly four per year; and seniors about two per year.

It is easy for people to confuse a bad cold with the flu, but there are unique characteristics of each. Headache, high fever, severe aches and pains in body parts, extreme fatigue, weakness and exhaustion often accompany the flu, and are uncommon or less severe with the common cold. The common cold frequently has symptoms of stuffy nose, sneezing, and sore throat, whereas these symptoms will sometimes occur with the flu. The main complications of the flu and common cold are bacterial infections of the sinuses or lungs (pneumonia). Symptoms of these

complications include fever, chills, and yellow, green or brown sputum or nasal discharge. Children may also develop ear infections. These complications are signs that medical treatment may be necessary.

Knowing how viruses and germs spread, it is understandable that one of the best ways to prevent catching the cold or flu is through proper hand washing. Without proper hand washing, the spread of germs follows a chain reaction. First, the germs travel from the hands to the eyes, ears, nose, or mouth. From there, they spread to other people or to surfaces such as doorknobs. This then paves the course of hand-to-hand transmission of these infectious diseases. Regular hand washing is something that all individuals should practice habitually. The best hand washing technique involves three simple steps. First, use warm water whenever possible. Second, work up a good lather all the way up to the wrists for at least 10 to 15 seconds. The use of regular soap is sufficient for washing. Third, do not forget to wash all surfaces including the backs of the hands, wrists, between the fingers, and especially the fingernails. Get in the habit of frequently washing your hands when touching anything in public. Try to avoid rubbing your eyes, ears, or nose with unwashed hands. This is one of the major ways we can prevent viruses from entering our bodies.



There are also many positive lifestyle changes individuals can make to help protect them from colds and flu. A well-balanced diet full of fruits and vegetables, along with adequate water intake is essential for optimal immune functioning. It is important to avoid foods that sabotage our health, and habits such as cigarette smoking, for our immune systems to function efficiently. Regular exercise has the ability to positively affect every organ, structure, and system in the body, including the immune system. Making sure you get enough restful sleep daily allows the body to recharge, recover, and recuperate. Stress management is key in keeping the body and mind strong. Individuals who continually fail to effectively manage stress may become more susceptible to illness.

The best approach in maximizing our immunity against colds and flu is to be proactive through preventative measures. Understanding how germs are spread and knowing how to protect ourselves through proper hygiene and healthy lifestyle habits can be very effective in preventing colds and flu or minimizing their severity.

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