



# Self-Care for Common Cold, Flu and COVID-19



# 1. Why is self-care important?



## **Most common colds, cases of influenza (flu), and mild cases of COVID-19 can be managed at home.**

- Self-care at home helps reduce contact with others, so as to reduce the spread of infections.
- Self-care at home also reduces the burden on healthcare services, so that they can focus on those with severe symptoms.

- Using simple over-the-counter (OTC) medications is often enough, and helps prevent unnecessary cost or side-effects.
- Antibiotics do *not* work against any of these viruses, and are therefore not usually needed for colds, coughs and flu symptoms.
- If you take antibiotics unnecessarily, they might then not work when you truly need them to treat a bacterial infection.

## 2. What are cold and flu symptoms?

Viruses cause many of the common symptoms that we have all experienced one time or another – the symptoms of a cold.

- **Nose** – Viruses often start their 'attack' in our nose, and the body produces inflammation and mucus to fight the infection. This can cause blocked, and later runny, noses. This can last for up to 7–10 days, but it could be more than 2 weeks before your nose feels completely clear again, especially if you are also prone to allergy symptoms.
- **Sinuses** – These air-filled compartments in the bones of our face can fill up with mucus when we have a cold, causing congestion, pressure and pain.
- **Throat** - Some of the mucus drips down the back of our throat and the infection can spread to our throat. This can cause soreness, which can last for around one week.
- **Larynx** – further down from the throat we have the vocal cords. When these are affected, we can get hoarse or lose our voice completely.
- **Airways** – Some drops of mucus could be inhaled and we therefore get symptoms in our lungs, like cough or breathing problems. Cough can last for up to 3–4 weeks, and is often the last symptom to resolve.
- **Stomach** – Some mucus is usually swallowed, which is why some people get nausea or even vomiting.
- **Senses** – We often lose some of our sense of taste and smell when we have a cold, due to the blocked nose, but these symptoms seem to be especially noticeable with COVID-19 infections.



In addition to these localised symptoms, we can also get symptoms all over the body:

- **Fever** - a normal body response which helps fight infection (since viruses replicate better at lower temperatures). Fever is defined as  $> 37.5\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $> 99.5\text{ }^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) if measured from the mouth; or  $> 38.0\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $> 100.4\text{ }^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) from the ear (or rectum, in babies), or  $> 37.3\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $> 99.1\text{ }^{\circ}\text{F}$ ) from the armpit. In a few cases it can also be defined as  $> 1\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$  more than your usual body temperature.
- **Shivering** – this also helps raise the internal temperature further, and 'chills' are an evolutionary response to make us try to get even warmer.
- **Lethargy and loss of appetite** – this helps us rest more, thus conserving energy for the fight against the infection.
- **Muscle and joint pains** - these are due to tissues breaking down to release protein, which is used to build antibodies against the infection.

### 3.

# What are the basics of self-care?

**Stay home – Nobody with cold symptoms should be going to work or getting close to others. Help to limit the spread of whatever infection you might have.**

- **Rest** – Take it easy until you feel better. Sleep and rest help your body recover.
- **Fluids** – Always important for our health, but especially so during colds, as they help to keep mucus thin and easy to clear out. Keeping your throat moist also reduces pain and cough. You also need to replace fluids lost due to sweating and a runny nose. Try to have 6–9 glasses per day (or 1.5 to 2 litres), ideally water. Cold or hot drinks are both fine – whichever you prefer. Avoid alcoholic drinks and too many caffeinated drinks, as these could dehydrate you further (by causing you to pee more).

**Keep in mind that children, elderly and anyone with a mental or physical disability that could affect feeding are more susceptible to dehydration.**

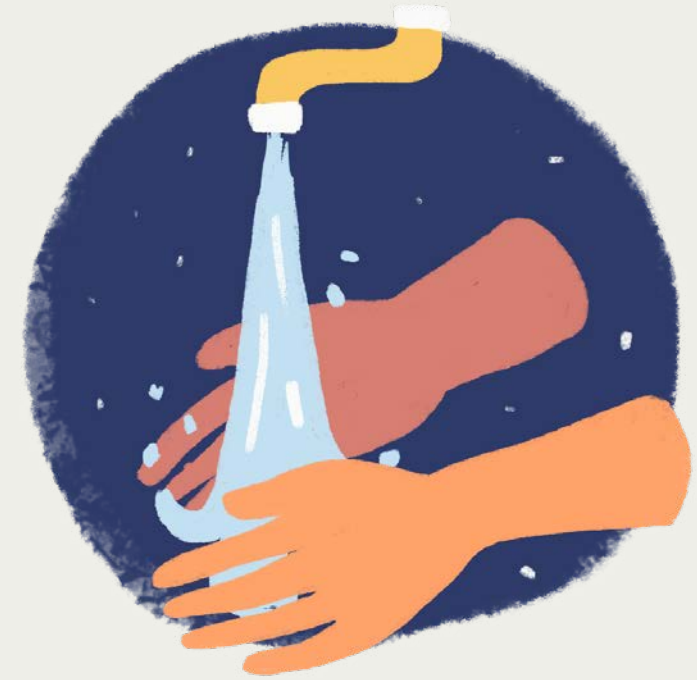
- **Home remedies** – ‘Honey and lemon’ can help with your cough and sore throat. Just mix lemon juice, honey and hot water. For a sore throat, cold food and drink might be soothing, but you could also try gargling with warm water and salt to reduce pain and swelling (1/2 teaspoon of salt in a cup of warm water, and don’t swallow).



- **For fever** - Try to keep cool. Wear fewer layers, choose colder drinks and food, and try to keep rooms at around 20°C. This is especially important for children. Plus Paracetamol and/or Ibuprofen (see below) to help reduce the fever and make you more comfortable.
- **Eat healthily** - Including fruit and vegetables. Ensure that elderly patients are getting enough protein in their diet (meat, fish, eggs, legumes).
- **Isolation** - Avoid unnecessary contact with others. If you have to be close to others, wear a mask.
- **Smoking** – Avoid or at very least reduce, including secondhand smoke.
- **Give it time** – Make sure you have recovered fully before returning to your normal routine, especially if you are returning to a work place where you might infect others if you still have symptoms. In the case of COVID-19, follow advice from Public Health authorities about how long you need to stay in quarantine.

# What are the basics of self-care?

## *continued...*



### Infection control at home

- Ventilate your room and any shared spaces in the house, weather permitting.
- Minimise shared space – if possible, use your own bedroom and/or bathroom.
- Use dedicated utensils and linen, and wash after use.
- Hand hygiene – wash your hands often, especially after sneezing or coughing, before preparing food and whilst using the bathroom.
- Masks – for the patient, if they can tolerate it, and can also be worn by carers when in proximity.
- Breastfeeding mothers – wear a mask and use careful hand hygiene when in close contact with your baby.

### Special considerations

- **Diabetics** – keep a close eye on your blood sugar readings during infections.
- **Hypertensives** (those with high blood pressure) – keep an eye on your readings and mention your condition to pharmacists before buying OTC preparations.
- **Asthmatics** – keep a 'rescue/reliever' inhaler handy (e.g. salbutamol/terbutaline), but more importantly, make sure you are taking your 'preventer' (steroid) inhaler daily.
- **Vaccination** – everyone, including young children, can have the annual vaccine to help prevent seasonal influenza. So far, there is no vaccine against the common cold, or COVID-19.

## 4. What over-the-counter medication can I use?



**Always read the labels, and ask your pharmacist for instructions.**

- **Paracetamol** is safe for all ages, does not interact with other medications, is gentle on the stomach, and is still the best medicine available for bringing down fever. It also helps with pain.
- **Anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs)** such as Ibuprofen can help, in addition to Paracetamol, with fever and pain. Ideally avoid them if you have a history of heart, stomach, kidney, blood pressure or asthma problems. Not suitable for children under age 6 months, unless over 5kg weight. Always take on a full stomach.
- **Saline (salt water) sprays** and washouts can help with nasal and sinus congestion.
- **Stronger nasal decongestants** (e.g. containing Xylometazoline) can be used safely for up to a week, but not in very young children.
- **Throat lozenges** – some contain local anaesthetic to relieve pain, and all of them stimulate saliva production to moisten your throat. Ideally choose sugar-free ones.
- **Decongestant tablets** – these can be used instead of sprays, and are often combined with Paracetamol in flu preparations. Not suitable for those with high blood pressure, and not ideal in the evening, as they can keep you awake.
- **Cough syrups** might help soothe your throat or stop cough from disturbing your sleep.

**Do not take two medicines with the same ingredients (e.g. Paracetamol plus an 'all-in-one' flu medication that also contains Paracetamol).**

## 5. What are 'red flag' symptoms?

These symptoms could be worrying, and you should discuss them with your doctor or pharmacist, as they might mean your cold has progressed to something which needs further attention.

- **Persistent fever** for more than 3-4 days.
- Fever **not responding to medication**, or very high fever (>39-40 °C/>103-104 °F).
- Sore throat **not responding to painkillers**.
- Sinus pain that is severe, or if you have a lot of **foul-smelling, green nasal discharge**. This may be due to infection of the sinuses.
- **Shortness of breath**.
- **Confusion**.
- **Chest pains**, breathing pains, also if associated with cough.



- **Cough lasting more than 3 weeks**, especially if it is not improving.
- Coughing up **blood**.
- **Weight loss** for no clear reason over a period of over 6 weeks.
- **Hoarseness lasting more than 3 weeks**, even after cough settles.
- Sore throats or other cold symptoms if you are **immunosuppressed**.
- **In children** – being lethargic, non-responsive, 'floppy'. Also, not taking any fluids, especially if no urination for over 6 hours (babies) or 8 hours (older children).

## 6. Who can I contact for more help?

- **Pharmacists** – You or your carers can discuss use of over-the-counter medications with your local pharmacist. They will be able to guide you on proper use. Be sure to mention any regular medication or health problems you may have, as this may affect what you should or should not take. They can also advise you on whether you need to see a doctor or not.
- **Public Health (Phone 111)** – You can call to speak to Public Health and see if you should be tested for COVID-19.
- **GPs (Family Doctors)** – If you don't need to be tested, or if your test was negative, you can speak to your family doctor (GP), especially if self-care isn't helping to improve your symptoms. They will also be able to help with any paperwork you may need for work.
- **Online** – If you look up information online, make sure it is coming from a reputable source, such as health departments or organisations. Recommended sources include government health departments, the [World Health Organisation \(WHO\)](#), the UK's [National Health Service \(NHS\)](#), [Mayo Clinic](#), [Thuisarts](#) (can be translated from Dutch to English via Google translate) and [Patient.info](#). Ideally do not get your advice just from individuals, especially those without a medical background.
- **Emergency (Phone 112)** – Hospital is only for severe cases, so only call an ambulance or go to Emergency if you have any severe symptoms, or if advised to do so by any of the other healthcare professionals listed above.



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### Resources:

- PAGB 'When Will I Feel Better' ([http://www.selfcareforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/1603\\_PAGB\\_Feel\\_Better\\_6pp\\_MASTER\\_screen.pdf](http://www.selfcareforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/1603_PAGB_Feel_Better_6pp_MASTER_screen.pdf)) – accessed 29th March 2020.
- Quebec.ca COVID-19 Self-care Guide ([https://cdn-contenu.quebec.ca/cdn-contenu/sante/documents/Problemes\\_de\\_sante/19-210-30A\\_Guide-auto-soins\\_anglaispdf?1584985885](https://cdn-contenu.quebec.ca/cdn-contenu/sante/documents/Problemes_de_sante/19-210-30A_Guide-auto-soins_anglaispdf?1584985885)) – accessed 31st March 2020.
- WHO Covid-19 info (<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>) – accessed 1st April 2020.
- RCGP Information Leaflet for Home Carers of COVID19 Patients ([https://elearning.rcgp.org.uk/pluginfile.php/149506/mod\\_page/content/33/Information%20leaflet%20for%20home%20carers%20of%20COVID%2019%20patients%20V2.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3rC-QxnEEed7jv2GB7IAYQcb8MyPssvtPM3yB7i9dgQ2nZGiTOac6LM8](https://elearning.rcgp.org.uk/pluginfile.php/149506/mod_page/content/33/Information%20leaflet%20for%20home%20carers%20of%20COVID%2019%20patients%20V2.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3rC-QxnEEed7jv2GB7IAYQcb8MyPssvtPM3yB7i9dgQ2nZGiTOac6LM8)) – accessed 7th April 2020.
- Webb, M, 2019, 'The Cold War', *Delayed Gratification*, Issue 36, July to Sept 2019, pp. 98–103.