

## Stop winter germs in their tracks

Colds and flu – no big deal, right? Well, yes and no. They *usually* don't last a really long time or cause serious problems.

Colds can plague you with everything from a stuffy and runny nose to a scratchy throat and watery eyes – *and* nonstop sneezing that can even put your cat on edge. Flu bugs bring symptoms that can look a lot like a cold. But the flu tends to ambush you suddenly, last longer, and pile on other "treats" such as fever, fatigue, headache, chills, and achiness.<sup>1</sup>

Some people who get the flu, though, are at risk for pretty serious health problems. In fact, flu-related complications send more than 200,000 Americans to the hospital each year with thousands dying.<sup>1</sup> Even the common cold takes a toll, accounting for 22 million lost school days in the U.S. each year.<sup>2</sup>

Prevention is looking better and better, isn't it?

The number-one thing you can do to prevent the flu? Get a flu vaccine, which protects against the three most likely flu viruses to strike each season. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) now recommends that everyone six months and older get a flu vaccine. Get the vaccine as soon as it is available if you are at high risk – you are pregnant, 65 or older, or have a chronic disease. It's also more important if you are a health care worker or care for someone who is at increased risk.<sup>3</sup>

Available as a shot or nasal spray, the flu vaccine is best received in October or November, although you may still benefit in December or January.<sup>1</sup> Ask your doctor or me if you have questions about this.

Colds and flu are spread mostly by droplets in the air or by touching a contaminated surface, then touching your eyes or nose. So some other simple steps may go a long way toward helping you prevent these common diseases.

Wash your hands often with warm, soapy water for about 15 to 20 seconds. If you're away from soap and water, an alcohol-based hand rub will do. Avoid touching your eyes, mouth, and nose as much as you can. No free rides for these germs! Set a good example for your kids and encourage them to do the same. Also, try to limit being around people who are infected.<sup>1</sup>

Sneezing and coughing yourself? You know the drill: Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue, then throw it in the trash. If there's no tissue in sight, cough or sneeze into your elbow or upper sleeve. Be sure to pass this tip on to your kids. If you've got a fever, stay home for at least 24 hours after the fever is gone – that is, gone without the use of a fever-lowering medicine.<sup>3</sup>

Don't forget that other all-around healthy habits – a balanced diet, sleep, exercise, and stress control – can help prevent colds and flu. And, remember that exposure to tobacco – firsthand or secondhand – makes you more prone to respiratory illnesses.<sup>1</sup>

## Sources

1. FDA: "Get Set for Winter Illness Season."  
<http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm092805.htm>
2. CDC: "Stopping Germs at Home, Work and School."  
[http://www.cdc.gov/germstopper/home\\_work\\_school.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/germstopper/home_work_school.htm)
3. CDC: "CDC Says 'Take 3' Actions To Fight the Flu."  
<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/protect/preventing.htm>