

Protecting Yourself From Viruses

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Most people catch at least one cold a year, and many also suffer from other infectious diseases. Therefore, it is important to know ways to reduce your risk of getting infected. Here are some steps you can take to protect yourself:

- Wash your hands. Your mother was right – clean hands prevent germs from spreading. Always wash your hands after coughing, sneezing, or blowing your nose into a tissue; after caring for a sick person, before preparing food or eating, and before touching your face. Although running tap water can wash away most germs, use soap for extra protection.
- Wash your hands often during flu season, especially if you shake hands often. (A handshake is more likely to spread a virus than a pat on the shoulder or a peck on the cheek.)
- Use a cleaning solution containing chlorine or disinfectant alcohol to kill germs on such surfaces as countertops, telephones, and doorknobs.
- Throw tissues away immediately after use; do not stuff them in your pocket or purse.
- Leave an open crack in windows when possible to circulate fresh air and remove germs. This is especially important in today's super-insulated houses. Colds and flu are more easily spread when people are indoors and windows are closed.
- Don't smoke. Exposure to cigarette smoke weakens the immune system and immobilizes the tiny hair like cells that clear nasal passages of germs, increasing your risk of colds and other infections.
- Consider getting a flu shot. People over the age of 65, health workers, anyone with a weakened immune system, diabetes, heart disease, or respiratory disorders should have a flu shot each fall. Individuals should not get flu shots if
 - They are allergic to eggs (because the flu vaccine contains egg protein) or they are allergic to thimersol (a preservative)
 - They have a history of Guillian Barre.
 - They are pregnant (note: flu shots are generally safe after the first trimester but you should still check with your doctor)
 - They have a cold or fever (note: these individuals should wait until symptoms disappear before getting a flu shot)

It's not possible to avoid viruses completely, but you can make it tough for them to make you sick. You can do this if you get plenty of rest, drink lots of liquids, eat a nutritious diet, avoid excess stress, and get enough exercise.

When to See a Doctor

You've done your best to stay healthy and avoid a cold or flu - to no avail. Now you're in bed with a fever or you've developed a "raw" throat from two days of coughing. Most colds or flu will run their course without serious complications. On occasions, however, what you might think is a cold may actually require medical attention. Look out for these danger signs and call your doctor if:

- You have a chronic condition, such as diabetes or lung or kidney problems.
- A cough produces green, yellow, brown, or bloody phlegm, or lasting more than two weeks.
- A fever exceeds 102 degrees F, remains over 101 degrees F for more than three days, or a lower fever persists for more than a week.
- A persistent fever accompanied by swollen glands, difficulty swallowing, or a persistent sore throat lasting more than 2 to 3 days.
- A fever accompanied by a stiff neck, headache, and confusion.
- Ear pain and/or sudden hearing loss.