Cold, flu, and COVID-19

5 whys of COVID-19 prevention

To slow the spread of COVID-19 and prevent healthcare systems from becoming overwhelmed with patients, there are steps everyone must take. Why? Until a vaccine becomes widely available, the best way to prevent the illness is to avoid exposure.

Here's the reasoning behind the steps that keep you and others from getting sick:

Wear a mask. Why? It protects others. The virus mainly spreads through the air, carried on droplets produced when an infected person talks, coughs, or sneezes. You could have the virus and not know it. A mask keeps those around you from getting sick. Wear it in public and when you're around people who don't live in your house.

Stay six feet away from people who don't live with you and anyone who is sick. Why? Keeping your distance helps prevent you from being exposed to the virus. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) notes that the virus spreads primarily among people who are in close contact (within about six feet) for a prolonged period.

Wash hands often (scrubbing for at least 20 seconds) or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Why? This gets rid of germs on your hands.

Routinely clean frequently touched objects. Why? This kills viruses that may be lingering on these surfaces. Use soap and water, and then disinfect.

Stay home if you're sick. Why? This keeps others from getting the virus. Watch for fever, cough, shortness of breath, or other COVID-19 symptoms. Call your health care provider if you have questions. ♦

Gloves not a necessary COVID accessory

If you're looking for extra protection from COVID-19, you don't need to worry about wearing gloves when you go to the grocery store or use an ATM.

Gloves only help in a pair of situations:

- When you're cleaning and disinfecting your home and this precaution is listed on the product label, and

- When cleaning up around someone who is sick.

Otherwise, washing your hands, or using hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent alcohol, is a better option for protection from germs. ♦

Antibiotics not a cure for these nasty viruses

If you come down with a cold, the flu, or COVID-19, you might wonder whether an antibiotic would help you recover.

The short answer is no. Antibiotics aren't prescribed for these illnesses because they don't work on viruses, the tiny organisms that bring colds, the flu, and COVID-19 into our bodies.

Antibiotics are used to treat conditions caused by bacteria. While both bacteria and viruses can be the source of misery such as coughing, fever, and vomiting, these microorganisms respond differently to treatments.

A bacterial infection, such as strep throat, may be cured by antibiotics. Antibiotics might also be used to treat an ear infection, pneumonia, or a sinus infection because these conditions could be caused by bacteria.

If a virus is the culprit, antibiotics won't help. There are other steps that can be taken to prevent and treat some viral illnesses, however.

Vaccines can be used to prevent some viral infections, such as the flu, polio, measles, and chickenpox. The flu can also be treated with antiviral medications (which are not antibiotics). They can make the illness milder and shorten the amount of time you're sick. ♦

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Cold, flu, and COVID-19: What's the difference?

The common cold, the flu, and COVID-19 are all caused by viruses that impact your respiratory system (nose, throat, and lungs), and it can be tough to determine which one is ailing you.
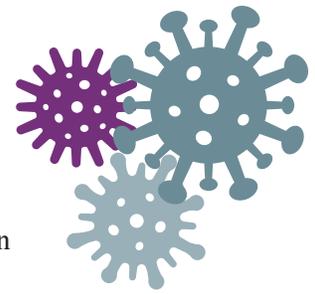
A cold is generally the mildest of the three and is unlikely to bring serious health problems. The flu can be dangerous, however, and COVID-19 can bring very serious complications.

Because their symptoms are similar, a test is the only way to know for sure which one you've come down with. Here's a look at some similarities and differences between these viruses:

	Cold	Flu	COVID-19
Symptoms	• Sneezing, stuffy or runny nose • Sore throat • Mild to moderate chest discomfort, cough • Slight aches • Fatigue, weakness (sometimes) • Fever (rare) • Headache (rare)	• Fever or feeling feverish/chills • Cough • Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing • Fatigue (tiredness) • Headache • Sore throat • Runny or stuffy nose • Muscle pain or body aches • Vomiting and diarrhea	• Fever or chills • Cough • Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing • Fatigue (tiredness) • Headache • Sore throat • Runny or stuffy nose • Muscle or body aches • Vomiting and diarrhea • New loss of taste or smell
Symptoms appear	Gradually; About 2 days after being infected	Abruptly; Usually 1 to 4 days after infection	2-14 days after exposure to the virus; Typically 5 days after being infected
Caused by	Various cold viruses	Various influenza viruses	A new coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2
Spreads	Mainly by droplets made when a person with the illness coughs, sneezes, or talks. Can also spread by human contact (shaking hands) or touching a surface with the virus and then touching the mouth, nose, or eyes.		
Spreads by infected people not showing symptoms	Yes	Yes	Yes; Can quickly and easily spread to many people through superspreading events.
Contagious for …	About 1 day before you feel sick. Most contagious during the first few days of illness; you may remain contagious as long as you feel sick.	About 1 day before you feel sick. Most contagious during first 3 to 4 days of illness; you may remain contagious for 7 days or longer.	About 2 days before showing symptoms. You may remain contagious for at least 10 days after symptoms appear or a positive test indicates you have the virus. It's not known how long someone can spread the virus.
Complications	Generally does not cause serious health problems, but complications can include pneumonia and bronchitis.	Can include pneumonia, respiratory failure, heart attack, stroke, or sepsis.	Can include pneumonia, respiratory failure, heart attack, stroke, sepsis, blood clots, or multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children.
Vaccine?	None	Annual vaccine offers protection against 3 to 4 commonly circulating viruses	Under development
Prevention	The same basic preventive measures can keep all three from spreading: handwashing, social distancing, wearing a mask, staying home when sick, cleaning commonly touched surfaces, coughing and sneezing into a tissue or your elbow.		

By the Numbers

In the **2019/2020 flu season**, there were up to **740,000 hospitalizations** and **62,000 deaths** nationwide due to the flu, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Through **early August 2020**, the CDC reported almost **45,000 hospitalizations** from COVID-19. Through **mid-August 2020**, Johns Hopkins Medicine reported more than **166,000 deaths** from COVID-19.

Next Month's Topic:

Healthy habits