

Protecting Yourself from Respiratory Illnesses

With season changes, many of us are often affected with respiratory illnesses. As people get older, or if they are living with chronic diseases, some respiratory illnesses can affect some people more than others. Today, we are going to talk about protecting yourself from respiratory illnesses, namely, the common cold, flu, RSV, and COVID.

The Common Cold is caused by a virus such as the rhinovirus and can spread easily from person to person through the air or close contact. There are some risk factors for catching a cold. They are:

- having close contact with someone who has a cold
- changes in the season (fall and winter are the most common times to catch a cold, but it can happen any time)
- age (children have more colds than adults)

Symptoms of the common cold include:

- Sneezing
- stuffy nose
- runny nose
- sore throat
- cough
- post-nasal drip (mucus dripping down your throat)
- watery eyes
- fever

During a cold, the mucus in your nose typically starts out clear and after a few days, it can turn white, yellow, or green. This color change is normal and doesn't mean that you need an antibiotic. Normally, colds do not require medical attention. They are a virus and will clear on their own. Some symptoms can take up to 10-14 days to clear. You should consider seeking medical attention if you have one of the following issues: trouble breathing or fast breathing, dehydration, fever for more than four days, no symptom improvement after 10 days, symptoms that begin to improve but then worsen, and worsening of chronic medical conditions.

Influenza, also known as the flu, is a respiratory illness that spreads from person to person. Illness can be mild to severe and can lead to hospitalization or death. The flu tends to occur at epidemic levels seasonally. This tends to be during Fall and Winter, however, it can happen at anytime of the year.

Flu symptoms can occur suddenly and can include:

- Fever
- Cough
- body aches
- sore throat
- runny or stuffy nose
- headache
- chills
- fatigue
- diarrhea
- vomiting

Please note that a person with the flu may have all or some of these symptoms. For most people, flu will clear the body within two weeks. Unfortunately, some people will develop complications. Complications can be moderate to severe such as ear or sinus infections, pneumonia, organ failure, or sepsis. Flu can also make pre-existing conditions worse such as triggering asthma attack in people with asthma. **While some people may be able to treat flu symptoms at home, you should seek medical attention if you have difficulty breathing, pain or pressure in chest, persistent dizziness or confusion, seizures, not urinating, severe muscle pain, severe weakness, and worsening of chronic medical conditions.**

RSV stands for respiratory syncytial (**sin-SISH-uhl**) virus. RSV season usually starts in the Fall and peaks in the Winter. **ASK: What age group does RSV affect? Can any other age group develop RSV?**

RSV can affect any one of any age group; however, infants and older adults tend to develop more severe cases that may require hospitalization. On estimate, anywhere from 60,000- 160,000 older adults develop RSV in the United States and 6,000- 10,000 die from the infection. Adults who are at a higher risk of developing severe RSV are older adults, those with chronic heart or lung disease, weakened immune systems, certain other underlying medical conditions, and adults living in nursing homes or long-term care facilities. Typically, adults with RSV infection present with mild cold-like symptoms. Some people can develop pneumonia, or experience a worsening of chronic conditions such as asthma, COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), and congestive heart failure.

During 2020, we all learned about an emerging respiratory illness now known as COVID-19. **Coronavirus Disease 2019** is a respiratory illness similar to the flu, but it is caused by a different virus. It is not possible to know if you have COVID or the flu based on symptoms alone, because they share a lot of the same symptoms. A COVID diagnosis or suspected COVID does not always require hospitalization. There are sign to look for to determine if you or someone you know need to seek medical attention. If you have symptoms after being around someone with suspected or confirmed COVID, it is best practice to take a COVID test. Possible symptoms for COVID include fever or chills, cough, shortness of breath, fatigue, body aches, headache, lost of taste or smell, congestion, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and dizziness. This is a short list of possible symptoms as symptoms can vary by person.

That was a brief synopsis of four major respiratory illnesses. Most of us probably experienced at least two of these in our lifetime. (I personally have experienced ___ of the four). (*that can be shared if you want and are comfortable doing so*).

Treatment

Treatment for each of these viruses varies based on the virus as well as the person. The most important treatment is drinking plenty of water and getting plenty of rest, regardless of which virus you have. For the common cold, there is no cure. You can take over the counter medications to treat symptoms such as cough syrup for a cough. Antibiotics will NOT help cure viruses and taking them could potentially lead to more illness from their side effects. Your medical team can provide anti-viral medications to help

with some respiratory illnesses; however, time is of importance. Most anti-viral meds have to be taken within 5-7 days of first symptoms.

Prevention

Respiratory illnesses, like the ones we just discussed, can significantly impact our health and well-being. Fortunately, there are steps we can take to reduce the risk of these illnesses and keep our respiratory system healthy. These steps include:

- avoiding contact with sick people
- limit your contact to others if you are sick
- cover you nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze (preferably with a tissue)
- wash your hands with soap and water
- try to avoid touching you eyes nose and mouth as these are entry points for germs
- clean and disinfect surfaces regularly.
- don't smoke and avoid secondhand smoke
- receive vaccines as needed
- stay home while you are sick

By following these preventive measures and adopting healthy habits, you can reduce your risk of respiratory illnesses and promote optimal respiratory health. Remember that prevention is key, and taking proactive steps to protect yourself and others can make a significant difference in staying well during cold and flu season and beyond.

Note: There is a handout attached that can be given to participants as a reminder of prevention tips. I suggest printing on colored paper to help the information stand out.

Resources

<https://www.cdc.gov/antibiotic-use/colds.html>

<https://www.cdc.gov/antibiotic-use/flu.html>

<https://www.cdc.gov/rsv/high-risk/older-adults.html>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/treatments-for-severe-illness.html>

<https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/pdf/handwashing-is-in-8x11.pdf> (this link is for visual use during the presentation. It's use is optional.)

Preventing Respiratory Illnesses: Tips for a Healthy Respiratory System

1. Practice Good Hand Hygiene:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after coughing, sneezing, or touching surfaces in public places.
- Use alcohol-based hand sanitizers when soap and water are not available, but remember that handwashing is preferred for removing dirt and germs.

2. Cover Your Mouth and Nose:

- When coughing or sneezing, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or the inside of your elbow to prevent the spread of respiratory droplets.
- Dispose of used tissues promptly and wash your hands afterward to prevent the transmission of germs.

3. Practice Respiratory Etiquette:

- Avoid close contact with individuals who are sick, and if you are sick, stay home to prevent spreading illness to others.
- Maintain a safe distance from others, especially in crowded or enclosed spaces where respiratory viruses can spread more easily.

4. Maintain a Healthy Lifestyle:

- Eat a balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins to support your immune system and overall health.
- Stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water throughout the day, as adequate hydration is essential for optimal respiratory function.

5. Get Vaccinated:

- Receive annual flu vaccinations to protect against seasonal influenza viruses, especially if you are at higher risk of complications from the flu.
- Stay up to date with other recommended vaccinations, such as pneumococcal vaccines, which can help prevent certain types of pneumonia.

6. Keep Your Environment Clean:

- Regularly clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces, such as doorknobs, countertops, and electronic devices, to reduce the spread of respiratory viruses.
- Ensure good ventilation in indoor spaces by opening windows or using air purifiers to improve air quality and reduce the concentration of airborne pathogens.

7. Practice Respiratory Health Habits:

- Avoid smoking and exposure to secondhand smoke, as smoking can damage the lungs and increase the risk of respiratory infections and chronic respiratory conditions.
- Exercise regularly to strengthen your respiratory muscles and improve lung function, aiming for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity per week.

8. Seek Prompt Medical Attention:

- If you develop symptoms of a respiratory illness, such as cough, fever, sore throat, or difficulty breathing, seek medical advice promptly.
- Follow healthcare recommendations for treatment and self-care, including rest, hydration, and over-the-counter medications as appropriate.