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How to manage your flu symptoms at home

Winter is coming and that means flu season is also about to be in full swing. Most of us are familiar with the headaches, pains, sore throat and runny nose, but you don't have to suffer through it - there are steps you can take to manage your symptoms at home.

This year, with coronavirus already putting pressure on the NHS, it's important to protect yourself from the flu by getting your yearly vaccine.

It's also important to stay home as much as possible if you have the flu to avoid passing it on to others; this will help ensure our hospitals don't get overwhelmed during the colder months.

However, there are times when you may need to see a doctor, but we will get to that later.

Professor Martin Marshall, chair of the Royal College of GPs, and Dr Ravi Tomar, GP partner at Portland Medical and Doctorlink, explain how you can manage your flu symptoms at home.

Know the signs

First of all, it's important you know the symptoms of flu before you can manage them.

"The main symptoms of the flu are usually those affecting the full body. These include symptoms such as fever, [fatigue](#), aches, pains and [headaches](#) rather than symptoms in isolated areas of the body such as the upper airway and chest," Dr Tomar says.

Flu symptoms can come on very quickly and will often feel worse than a [common cold](#).

Look out for:

- A temperature above 38°C
- Aching body
- Feeling exhausted
- A **sore throat**
- Dry **cough**
- **Difficulty sleeping**
- Headaches
- Feeling sick or being sick
- Tummy pain
- Loss of **appetite**

Symptoms are usually the same in children and adults, but sometimes children will experience [earaches](#).

Over-the-counter treatments

Luckily, there are plenty of over-the-counter treatments that can help ease your pain.

"Flu can be an unpleasant disease, but for otherwise healthy people it usually passes on its own within a couple of weeks without complication," Professor Marshall says.

"Patients who have the flu should get plenty of rest; keep up their fluids to avoid [dehydration](#) and control symptoms such as fever and aches with [paracetamol](#) or [ibuprofen](#), where necessary."

While painkillers can help with overall aches and pains, there are other options for sore throats and coughs.

"For symptoms affecting the throat, cough syrups or lozenges and throat sprays can be very helpful. If your nose is blocked, sinus rinses or decongestant sprays can be used short-term," Dr Tomar adds.

You should always take painkillers as directed on the packet and speak with a pharmacist about the right medications for you.

At-home remedies

There are also a number of at-home remedies that might be helpful in relieving symptoms. Honey and lemon, for instance, can help a sore throat, while steam can help unblock your nose.

"While the scientific evidence behind many home remedies has not been established, they can often be found as helpful additions to over-the-counter treatments," Dr Tomar says.

"Hot water with honey and lemon works well to relieve throat symptoms, while steam inhalation - with or without an added oil - can help to unblock the nose.

"Furthermore, many food sources have been shown to have some effect in [boosting the immune system](#). These include beta carotene, [vitamin D](#) and zinc, which can be found in [vegetables](#), fortified cereals and beans."

When should you stay home?

Anyone who has symptoms of influenza should take 5-7 days off work to avoid spreading the illness, Dr Tomar explains.

"Spending this time resting will also give the body time to get better and you're likely to see a faster recovery without risking prolonging or worsening your symptoms," he says.

"If you can work from home, this might be the best initial practice at the onset of symptoms to see if you can manage them while continuing to be productive."

While it's advisable to stay home as much as possible to stop spreading the illness, there are times where seeing a doctor is necessary. If your symptoms persist for longer than 5-7 days, or affect your breathing, you should seek medical advice.

"For the majority of people suffering from the flu, they will not need to seek further medical advice during the course of the illness. However, if the illness persists for longer than expected, is more severe, distressing, or affecting your breathing then this may suggest an alternative cause or a particularly bad case of flu," Dr Tomar adds.

The best protection

The best way to protect yourself, and also help stop the spread of flu, is to get your flu vaccine.

This year the government has expanded its [vaccination programme](#) to prevent as many flu cases as possible in a bid to prevent hospitals becoming overwhelmed with flu while already managing a pandemic.

"General practice is preparing for an expanded flu vaccination programme, whereby those aged 50-64 will also be eligible for a flu jab, subject to there being adequate supplies," Professor Marshall explains.

"In part, this is to help protect patients and the NHS this winter in the event of a second wave of COVID-19. During the pandemic, it's more important than ever that patients in at-risk groups, including older people, pregnant women and those with long-term conditions or learning difficulties, get their flu jab.

"It is the best protection we have against the flu and we urge all patients in at-risk groups to get vaccinated – and for parents of young children to arrange this for their children – as soon as possible."

You can find out if you are eligible for a free flu vaccine or book one privately using the Patient Access [flu checker](#).

COVID-19 or the flu?

This flu season it's important to know the difference between the [flu and COVID-19](#). While some of the symptoms are very similar, there are others that you should look out for.

"Some symptoms of COVID-19 are similar to other common conditions such as colds and flu. If a patient is suffering with recognised symptoms of the COVID-19 virus – a new and persistent cough, a fever or a loss of taste and smell – we would urge them to self-isolate immediately for the recommended length of time and get tested," Professor Marshall says.

"If a patient is unsure or confused about their symptoms, we could encourage them to contact NHS 111 coronavirus service in the first instance, which should direct them to the most appropriate care or medical advice."

You can seek medical advice through [NHS 111 online](#) or by calling 111 (or the relevant number for your region) if you don't have access to the internet or if you're unsure of your symptoms.

If you do think you have COVID-19 you should self-isolate and [book a test](#) as soon as possible. If your test is positive, you'll need to self-isolate for at least 10 days, and everyone you're in close contact with will need to self-isolate for 14 days from the last time they were in close contact with you.

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