

View this article online at: patient.info/news-and-features/what-is-freshers-flu-and-how-long-does-it-last

What is freshers' flu and how long does it last?

From meeting your future besties to enduring messy sports team initiations, freshers' week is an exciting time. Freshers' flu can sometimes ruin that fun, but there are things you can do to try to dodge start-of-term illnesses, and to help yourself bounce back if it does strike you down.

What is freshers' flu?

If you're starting university, you're probably looking forward to the assortment of fun (and often messy) social events at the start of term. Among students, this period of getting to know new friends is affectionately known as freshers' week, although it often lasts longer. However, there is one aspect of freshers' week that no one looks forward to – the dreaded spread of freshers' flu.

For those not yet in the know, freshers' flu is the name given to the wave of colds and other bugs that spread quickly through the student population when autumn terms begins. This happens because:

- You tend to spend a lot of time mingling with new people and this exposes you to new strains of bacteria that your immune system hasn't had to fight off before.
- University starts in autumn which is also the beginning of 'flu season' for the general population. This is because colder temperatures allow germs to circulate more freely.

Symptoms of freshers' flu

Thankfully, freshers' flu is not the same as the actual [flu](#) (caused by the influenza virus) and symptoms don't tend to be as severe. This said, catching freshers' flu causes some flu-like symptoms and is by no means a pleasant experience. It can really put a dampener on the start-of-term celebrations.

Some students feel generally run down while others experience freshers' flu as a bad [cold](#).

You may have freshers' flu if:

- You have a [sore throat](#).
- Your nose is stuffy or runny.
- You have a [cough](#).
- You feel weak or tired.
- You have a [headache](#).
- You have a [high temperature \(fever\)](#).
- You [feel sick \(nauseous\)](#).
- Your appetite is reduced.

How long does freshers' flu last?

Much like the common cold, symptoms of freshers' flu usually last for up to two weeks, according to general practitioner (GP) Hana Patel. "But usually our bodies can fight off the infection within 3-4 days," she adds.

If you're still feeling unwell after two weeks, or you find your symptoms are becoming worse, you should speak to your doctor as it may be something else. If your university isn't in your hometown, this is one reason why it's important to register with a local GP surgery as soon as term starts!

How to avoid freshers' flu

Some students do manage to dodge this rite of passage, but if you are planning to mix with your new peers, Patel explains that there's no bulletproof way to avoid freshers' flu: "As with any cold or flu, it's difficult to avoid freshers' flu as you can be unlucky and pick it up from anywhere."

Bacteria and viruses can spread easily between people touching or even breathing close to each other. If you're sharing a flat or house, germs can also spread by people touching the same surfaces, like door handles and kitchen counters.

This said, catching freshers' flu and other illnesses becomes less of a risk when you practise good hygiene. UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) recommends that you¹:

- Regularly wash your hands with soap and warm water.
- Use tissues when you sneeze or cough and bin them as quickly as possible.
- Use hand sanitizers and [face masks](#) if mixing with a lot of people.
- Keep your distance from others if you feel unwell.

Other ways to help avoid freshers' flu and other infections:

- Drinking plenty of water – staying hydrated helps your body prevent bacteria from entering the body².
- Getting enough rest – try to take some nights off during freshers' week as a lack of sleep reduces your body's ability to fight infections³.
- Eating lots of fruit and veg – the vitamins in these foods can be used by your white blood cells to fight infections⁴.

How to recover from freshers' flu

If freshers' flu strikes you down, don't try to push through it, no matter how much you're enjoying your new social calendar. Instead, keep your distance from others as much as possible, and take the time to look after yourself.

Looking after yourself with freshers' flu involves all of the healthy habits you can adopt to help avoid it. As well as eating healthily, staying hydrated, and resting up, now is the time to also:

- Take medication – according to Patel, [paracetamol](#) will help ease body aches and pains and lower a fever. "For managing other symptoms of freshers' flu, speak to your GP, another healthcare professional, or your local pharmacist".
- Lay off the alcohol – it may not be what you want to hear during freshers' week, but alcohol can weaken your immune system's response to the illness.
- Avoid junk food – while your new flatmates order unhealthy convenience food, swapping that takeaway pizza or pot noodle for vitamin-packed [quick student meals](#) can help your immune system to fight the illness.

Freshers' flu or COVID-19?

Don't forget, the symptoms of freshers' flu could also be signs of other infections, including [COVID-19](#). As soon as you start to feel unwell, take a COVID-19 test to rule out this possibility, and try to avoid close contact with people until you have seen your result.

UKHSA also suggests that students get two doses of the [COVID-19 vaccine](#) and take a COVID-19 test before travelling to university, to help limit the spread during term time. It also recommends making sure you're vaccinated against other infectious diseases that can circulate – this includes ensuring you have the [MMR \(measles, mumps, and rubella\) vaccine](#) and the [MenACWY \(meningitis\) vaccine](#).

Remember, if you're travelling for university, register with your new local GP surgery as soon as possible. You can then enjoy university life safe in the knowledge that the support is there if you do fall ill or find you're in need of a vaccine. Welcome to adulting, students!

Further reading

1. [GOV.UK, The education hub](#).

2. [Canadian Digestive Health Foundation, The importance of staying hydrated: general hydration and virus recovery.](#)
3. [Robinson, The relationship between duration and quality of sleep and upper respiratory tract infections: a systematic review.](#)
4. [Medical Research Council, Vitamins help your immune system fight infection - but not how you might think!.](#)

Disclaimer: This article is for information only and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions. Egton Medical Information Systems Limited has used all reasonable care in compiling the information but makes no warranty as to its accuracy. Consult a doctor or other healthcare professional for diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions. For details see our [conditions](#).

Authored by: Amberley Davis	Peer Reviewed by: Dr Krishna Vakharia, MRCP	
Originally Published: 20/11/2023		Document ID: doc_32070

View this article online at: patient.info/news-and-features/what-is-freshers-flu-and-how-long-does-it-last

Discuss What is freshers' flu and how long does it last? and find more trusted resources at [Patient](#).



To find out more visit www.patientaccess.com or download the app



Follow us

