

Patient & Family Guide

2025

Respiratory (Breathing) Infections



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Respiratory (Breathing) Infections

What are respiratory (breathing) infections?

Respiratory infections affect your nose, throat, sinuses, and/or lungs (chest) and can be caused by viruses. Examples of respiratory infections include the common cold, influenza (flu), and COVID-19.

What is the common cold?

- The common cold is a respiratory infection caused by a virus. It may affect the nose, throat, and lungs.
- The first signs of a cold are usually a sore throat and runny nose, followed by coughing and sneezing.
- Most people get better on their own in about 7 to 10 days.
- Colds are most common in the winter and spring, but it is possible to get a cold at any time of the year. There are currently no vaccines that fight the common cold.

What is influenza (the flu)?

- The flu is a respiratory infection caused by a virus. It may affect the nose, throat, and lungs. The flu is different from a cold.
- The flu usually comes on suddenly. It can cause mild to severe (very bad) illness.
- Most people are sick for several days, or as long as 2 weeks. Some people develop complications, like ear or sinus infections, bronchitis (infection of the airways that lead to the lungs), or pneumonia (lung infection). Some people have to be admitted to the hospital for the flu and its complications. Some people are very sick so they have to be admitted to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU).
- The flu is most common between November and April. There is an annual vaccine that is available every fall.

What is COVID-19?

- COVID-19 is a respiratory infection caused by a new coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2.
- This coronavirus was first identified in late 2019.
- Coronaviruses are a group of viruses that can cause a variety of infections. These include the common cold, bronchitis, pneumonia, and severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS).
- It can take up to 14 days (2 weeks) to develop symptoms after you are exposed to the virus.
- The infection may be mild or severe. It can affect people in different ways. This may depend on how healthy you were before getting COVID-19 and if you have received a full dosage (2 doses) of the COVID-19 vaccine.
- Symptoms may last for a few days or longer. Some people may have long-lasting symptoms even after they are no longer infectious (able to pass the virus to someone else). These may include joint pain, fatigue (tiredness), shortness of breath, and brain fog.
- Some of the symptoms of the flu and COVID-19 are similar. This can make it hard to tell which infection you have. You may need a test to find out.

What are your questions?

Please ask a member of your health care team. We are here to help you.

Cold, Flu, and COVID-19 Symptoms

Symptom	Cold	Flu	COVID-19
Fever	Not common (usually less than 38 °C or 100.4 °F)	Common (high fever of 38 to 40 °C or 100.4 to 104 °F may last for 3 to 4 days)	Common (may also have chills)
Runny nose	Common	Sometimes	Common
Headache	Sometimes	Common (may be severe)	Common
General aches and pains	Sometimes	Common (may be severe)	Common
Fatigue (tiredness, weakness)	Mild	May last for up to 2 to 3 weeks	Common
Nausea (upset stomach)	Not common	Common	Sometimes
Diarrhea (loose, watery poop)	Not common	Sometimes	Sometimes
Lack of appetite (not feeling hungry)	Sometimes	Common	Sometimes, with loss of taste and/or smell
Sneezing	Common	Sometimes	Sometimes
Chest discomfort, cough	Mild to moderate	Common (often severe)	Common, may have shortness of breath (breathlessness)
Sore throat	Common	Sometimes	Common
Watery eyes	Common	Sometimes	Possible, but not common

How do respiratory infections spread?

Respiratory infections can spread easily from person to person through coughing or sneezing. They can also spread if you touch a surface or shake a person's hand with the virus on it, then wipe your nose, mouth, or eyes.

How can I protect myself and others from getting a respiratory infection?

- Ask your primary health care provider if you need any vaccines to prevent infections, like the flu and COVID-19.
- Follow all Public Health guidance about wearing a mask in public and physical distancing.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water or use an alcohol-based hand rub, especially:
 - › before touching your face.
 - › before eating.
 - › after using the washroom.
- **Keep your hands away from your face** (especially your eyes, nose, and mouth). Many infections are spread when people with germs on their hands touch their face and then touch other surfaces.
- **Cough or sneeze into your arm, not your hand.** If you use a tissue, throw it away as soon as you use it, and then wash your hands. Use a new tissue each time you cough or sneeze.
- Stay away from people who are sick.
- If you get sick, stay home until your symptoms are gone.
- Keep common surfaces (like light switches, phones, and door handles) clean and germ-free.
- Help children and others who may need help to wash or sanitize their hands often.

What should I do if I get a respiratory infection?

- **It is important to stay home while you are sick.** Rest and drink plenty of fluids.
- Your pharmacist or primary health care provider may suggest taking medication (like ibuprofen or acetaminophen) to help with a fever or body aches.
- Wash your hands often to avoid spreading the infection to others.
- **Do not visit the hospital while you are sick** unless you are going to get medical care for yourself. Tell the person at the registration area if you are not feeling well or think you may have a respiratory infection. You may be asked to wear a mask while waiting.

Call your primary health care provider if your symptoms get worse. Call 811 or go to the nearest Emergency Department right away if you have:

- Sudden shortness of breath or trouble breathing
- Shortness of breath or trouble breathing that is getting worse
- Chest pain
- Bloody or coloured mucus (phlegm)
- Severe pain in your head or face
- High fever (temperature of 38 to 40 °C or 100.4 to 104 °F) for more than 3 days

What will happen at the hospital?

- If you are admitted to the hospital for respiratory symptoms, the doctor may order a swab of your nose or throat to check for viruses.
- If you have respiratory symptoms, your health care providers may take extra care and use 'Droplet and Contact Precautions'. This means staff will wear gloves, gowns, masks, and eye protection (goggles, face shields) when caring for you. This lowers the chance of spreading the virus to other patients, staff, essential care partners, and visitors.
- Your essential care partners and visitors will be asked to follow the same safety measures when giving you direct care. They should not visit other patients after they visit you until the precautions have been removed.

Remember:

- Washing your hands with soap and water or an alcohol-based hand rub is the best way to stop the spread of infections in hospitals.
- Ask your primary health care provider about getting your flu shot and COVID-19 vaccination.

Notes:

This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

Find all patient education resources here:
www.nshealth.ca/patient-education-resources

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:
Call 811 or visit: <https://811.novascotia.ca>

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