

Upper respiratory tract infections involve the upper part of the respiratory system, i.e., the parts which are above the lungs. The upper respiratory system includes your ears, sinuses, nose, mouth, and throat. It also includes the tubes that carry air into your lungs. These tubes are called "bronchi." Upper respiratory infections are caused by bacteria, viruses, and fungi.

Most people have experienced one or more upper respiratory tract infections. Familiar examples of upper respiratory infections include influenza (flu), corzyra (the common cold), sinusitis, and acute bronchitis.

We almost "expect" to get at least one or two colds per year, seldom realizing that upper respiratory tract infections can be serious and even deadly for both healthy and sick people. Although the common cold (in itself) is rarely life threatening, healthy people can develop complications, which can be serious and even deadly. Serious complications, of course, are much more likely to occur in the most vulnerable, i.e., young children, the elderly, and people recovering from surgery. At least 36,000 people die every year in the United States from complications of the flu or other upper respiratory infections.

Is it a Cold or the Flu?

A common cold is usually a mild disease affecting the nose and throat. It is caused by a virus. There are more than two hundred different types of viruses that cause the symptoms, which are known as the "common cold."

Typical symptoms include a runny nose, sneezing, nasal and sinus congestion, sore throat, a cough, headaches and a general feeling of tiredness. Sometimes patients experience a slight fever. For most of us, a cold will last three to five days although you may continue to cough for up to three weeks or longer.

The common cold is different from influenza (the flu), i.e., it is caused by a different type of virus. While patients with the flu generally have some or all the symptoms associated with the common cold, they also experience rapidly rising fevers, chills and have more generalized and severe body and muscle aches. A high fever is a very good indicator that you have the flu – and not just a cold.

Prevent Upper Respiratory Tract Infections

It is important and smart to prevent upper respiratory tract infections. While most people know to “flee” or step back from co-workers and family members that are sneezing and sniffing, the fastest, most effective way to “catch” an upper respiratory infection is “hand to hand” contact, including touching objects that an infected person has recently handled.

The things and places where you can find cold and flu viruses are seemingly endless. “Cold” and influenza viruses can be found on objects such as pens, books, elevator buttons, table tops and coffee cups, among other things. Using a pen or turning on a water faucet, which have been contaminated with viruses, and then accidentally touching your nose or eyes, can start you on your way to a respiratory infection.

Both cold and flu viruses are very infectious, i.e., they are easily transmitted between people and from inanimate surfaces to people. You can pick up an influenza virus, for example, by touching a non porous surface such as a grocery cart handle or a faucet handle up to 48 hours after someone harboring a flu virus has accidentally deposited the virus there. Porous surfaces, such as clothing and furniture, can be infectious for up to eight hours.

Prevention is usually quite simple. Recently, for example, many super markets in both big cities and small towns have started to offer disinfecting wipes to use to wipe the handle of your grocery cart.

Does this make sense or is it silly? The answer is use the wipes! If your grocery store does not have them at the door, bring your own!

Steps to Take Every Day

Other preventive steps that all of us should do every day – all day long - include:

Wash your hands after shaking hands with other people, even those that do not seem to be harboring colds and flu viruses. Shaking hands is one of the primary ways that people pass the viruses and bacteria that cause cold and influenza to each other. (Always carry alcohol wipes or use an alcohol based gel or spray. If you can't do that, avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth until you have thoroughly washed your hands.)

Don't share your lunch with others.

Wash your hands after using the bathroom. Always be careful not to touch your nose, eyes, or mouth after touching a door, a door knob, locks, toilet flushers, or even toilet paper rolls.

Remember that the first floor elevator button is usually a literal “cafeteria” for the bugs that cause upper respiratory tract infections.

Kitchen sponges are the number one source of germs in the house. Running a sponge through the dishwasher may not kill the viruses and bacteria and may, actually, deposit these germs on the dishes with which they are washed. Despite one study to the contrary, putting a sponge in the microwave is not sufficient to kill bacteria and viruses.

Treating Upper Respiratory Tract Infections

If you get an infection, your treatment will depend on whether your doctor thinks your problem is caused by a virus or a bacteria or both. If your doctor suspects a bacterial infection, he or she may prescribe an antibiotic. If he suspects a viral infection, such as a common cold or flu, the doctor will usually prescribe rest, liquids, and perhaps either prescription or over the counter remedies to relieve symptoms.

If you have been exposed to someone with influenza, your doctor may prescribe an anti viral rug. These medications will only work to relieve symptoms, however, if taken within 48 hours after exposure. It is more common for doctors to prescribe anti-viral medications only to individuals considered at high risk of complications from the flu, such as the elderly or people that have other conditions that affect their immune system.

Remember -

These common sense and simple steps may help prevent the spread of respiratory illnesses such as the common cold and flu:

Frequent hand-washing, especially during cold or flu season, can help prevent upper respiratory tract infections. Also try to avoid using your hands to wipe your eyes, nose, or mouth. Eating well, exercising, keeping stress levels low, and not smoking can also help.

Maintain a distance of at least three feet from people who have respiratory infections and/or are coughing.

Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze and throw the tissue away after you use it.

Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze.
If you
are not near water, use an alcohol-based hand cleaner.

Avoid close contact with people who are sick.

When you are sick, keep your distance from others to protect them from getting sick.

If you get the flu, stay home from work, school, and social gatherings. In this way
you will
help prevent others from catching your illness.

Try not to touch your eyes, nose, or mouth.

How Can Health Systems Management Help You?

Health Systems Management's Patient a Advocacy Program will help you and your family receive the information you need to make informed health care decisions. Informed health care "consumers," who have been prepared with objective, understandable and independent information can more easily form partnerships with their doctors and the other providers on their health care teams.

- **Use of this resource is totally voluntary and confidential. You can choose to use the resource at any time.**
- **Health Systems Management's professionals are available to answer your questions seven days a week and 24 hours a day.**
- **Please call us TOLL FREE at 1 866 961 1119 or email us at hsminc@gulftel.com.**
- **Check out our website at <http://www.hsminc.net> (You can send us a question or a message from this website.)**