

### Fighting Winter Infections

Cold, wet and windy weather around most of Australia in recent weeks has confirmed what our calendars have already announced. That is winter is with us.

And with winter comes colds & flu. Most of us will get a cold this year; those of us who are particularly ill prepared or at high risk, might even get the flu. So now is the time to take precautions.

Everyone over the age of 65 should have a yearly flu vaccine; and it's available free from your GP. Whatever your age, if you have a chronic condition such as heart or kidney disease, diabetes, asthma or bronchitis, the vaccine is well advised. Check with your doctor or pharmacist for more information.

The common cold will be much more common and its unlikely any of us will avoid at least some of the symptoms. Remember however, that relief of symptoms is all we can realistically offer. A cure for the common cold is still a long way off.

Of course being physically fit will mean we're better able to cope with the ever-changing cold virus. A diet rich in fruit and vegetables, adequate rest and appropriate exercise are the best prevention strategies.

You'll find plenty of preparations for the relief of cold symptoms at your pharmacy this winter; but you might benefit from some advice from your pharmacist before you self select. The shotgun approach of the multi-ingredient cough/cold day/night product is not always the best option.

High doses of vitamin C may reduce the severity and duration of cold symptoms, but daily doses greater than 2g can cause stomach cramps and diarrhoea.

Similarly, clinical studies of Echinacea have found that some preparations of the Echinacea purpurea variety have modest benefit; but there is no clear evidence of benefit with other preparations and no evidence of benefit at all in children.

Topical decongestants (such as nasal sprays) are generally more effective than oral decongestants, but their use should be limited to a maximum of five days to avoid rebound congestion. The older antihistamines will help dry up a runny nose but can cause sedation. To stop the leaking tap type nasal drip the so-called anti-cholinergic spray *Atrovent* may be a better choice.

The saline sprays such as *Fess* and *Narium* avoid the risk of rebound congestion and are especially good alternative for children & infants.

Simple pain relievers such as *Panadol* or *Nurofen* with or without decongestants such as Pseudoephedrine or Phenylephrine will sometimes be helpful for the short term relief of aches & pains and nasal congestion; and anti-inflammatory, anti-bacterial or anaesthetic lozenges like *Streptfen* may give some soothing relief to a sore throat.

One of the most annoying of all the symptoms of the common cold is the persistent cough and recent research has confirmed what most of us already know – its not only those who cough who feel annoyed. All those who have to listen to the cough feel pretty irritated too.

Coughing is an ideal way the transmit infection – principally by droplets of viruses and bacteria being coughed up by one person and inhaled by another. However, colds and flu can be literally caught. We are all taught to politely cover our mouths when we cough, but viruses can survive on the hand for hours; and hand to hand contact is another very effective way of spreading infection.

Depending on the kind of cough you have – dry and nagging or phlegmy and congestive – so different medicines will be appropriate. Your pharmacist can help you choose wisely.

The fact cards on *Cold & Flu*, *Sinus Problems*, & *Complimentary Medicines* will all help too. They're available from all Pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society's Self Care health information. Phone 1300 360 772 for the nearest location or go to the PSA website at [www.psa.org.au/pharmacies](http://www.psa.org.au/pharmacies)