Home Care Instructions for Respiratory Illnesses

Most people with mild respiratory illness do not need medical care or prescription medications. In most cases, you should stay home and avoid contact with other people except to get urgent medical care.

If you test positive for COVID-19, influenza or RSV (respiratory syncytial virus), you will be informed by a call from a nurse and given further follow-up instructions. Until then, here is some home care advice:

Take steps to relieve symptoms

- **Manage fever and pain** with over-the-counter fever reducers and pain relievers, such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Follow manufacturer instructions for dosages per age or weight and don't exceed daily maximum doses (**Never give aspirin to children** under 18 years old due to risk of Reye's syndrome.)
- Be very careful if you are using more than one medication. If you use two medications with the same active ingredient (such as acetaminophen) you could get too much.
- **Drink enough fluids.** It is important to drink enough fluids to prevent dehydration (loss of body fluids).
- **Talk to your healthcare provider before giving children nonprescription cold medicines.** Many over-the-counter cough and cold medications are **not recommended** for children under age 4. These include:
    - Decongestants, to unclog a blocked nose. Examples include ephedrine, phenylephrine, and pseudoephedrine.
    - Cough suppressants, to reduce coughing. One example is dextromethorphan.
    - Cough expectorants, to help thin mucus so it can be coughed up. One example is guaifenesin.
    - Antihistamines, to reduce sneezing and a runny nose. One example is diphenhydramine.
- For treating cough, you can use honey and lemon mixed with some water. However, you should **never give honey to babies under 1 year old**, as they could develop a rare but serious illness called infant botulism.
- Nasal drops of saline (sterile salt water) can be used to help unblock a child's nose. These drops can be particularly helpful for babies who are having trouble feeding because of a blocked nose. You can also use nasal suction like a bulb syringe or a mouth-operated nasal aspirator.
- You can also help relieve a blocked nose using vapor rubs and inhaled decongestants that you put on skin or clothing, such as menthol. However, inhaled decongestants used as rubs or on clothing are not usually recommended for very young children, as they can be irritating.

Do I need to go to the emergency room or Express Clinic if I am only a little sick?

No. The emergency room should be used for people who are very sick. You should not go to the emergency room if you are only mildly ill.

If you get sick with respiratory symptoms and are at higher risk of respiratory complications or you are concerned about your illness, call your primary health care provider's office or the Jefferson Healthcare COVID RN Consult Line (360-344-3094) for advice.

If you have emergency warning signs of severe illness (see next section), you should go to the emergency room.

People experiencing any of these warning signs should obtain medical care right away.

In children:

- Fast breathing or trouble breathing
- Bluish lips or face
- Ribs pulling in with each breath
- Chest pain
- Severe muscle pain (child refuses to walk)
- Dehydration (no urine for 8 hours, dry mouth, no tears when crying)
- Not alert or interacting when awake
- Seizures
- Fever above **100.4°F** in infants **12 weeks old or younger**
- Fever above **104°F** in children **older than 12 weeks of age**
- Fever or cough that improve but then return or worsen
- Worsening of chronic medical condition

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In adults:

- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Persistent pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
- Persistent dizziness, confusion, inability to arouse
- Seizures
- Not urinating

- Severe muscle pain
- Severe weakness or unsteadiness
- Fever or cough that improve but then return or worsen
- Worsening of chronic medical conditions

These lists are not all inclusive. Please consult your medical provider for any other symptom that is severe or concerning.

How long should I stay home if I'm sick?

Stay home and isolate from others until you learn the results of your test. You will get a nurse call with follow-up isolation instructions if you are positive for COVID-19, influenza or RSV. If you are **negative** for COVID, CDC recommends that you stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone except to get medical care or other necessities. Your fever should be gone without the need to use a fever-reducing medicine, such as Tylenol®. Until then, you should stay home from work, school, travel, shopping, social events, and public gatherings.

What should I do while I'm sick?

Stay away from others as much as possible to keep from infecting them. If you must leave home, for example to get medical care, wear a facemask if you have one, or cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue. Wash your hands often to keep from spreading flu to others.

Do I need prescription medications?

There are no prescription medications available for RSV. Antiviral medications are available for influenza and COVID-19, for people who are in certain high-risk groups. If you are positive for either of these illnesses, the nurse will call you and will discuss if you may meet criteria for antiviral medication. Until you hear from a nurse, treat your symptoms with over-the-counter medications unless you develop severe symptoms and need urgent medical treatment.

The importance of vaccination

Respiratory illness season started early and severe in the United States this year. In Washington, flu activity started early and is increasing. COVID-19 is circulating. And we are seeing high rates of respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), which causes cold-like symptoms that often get better on their own but can become serious for infants and the elderly. All these respiratory illnesses are placing severe strain on our emergency departments and hospitals.

Our best protection against respiratory illness is prevention. **Washington State Department of Health strongly recommends everyone 6 months or older get a flu shot each year and get up to date on COVID-19 boosters.** Flu and COVID-19 vaccine are widely available in Washington. Most places that offer COVID-19 vaccine also offer flu vaccine, and you can get both at the same time. Find your vaccine at vaccinelocator.doh.wa.gov.

Resources:

COVID-19: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html

RSV: https://www.cdc.gov/rsv/about/symptoms.html

Influenza: https://www.cdc.gov/flu/treatment/takingcare.htm#are

Influenza antiviral treatment: https://www.cdc.gov/flu/treatment/index.html

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