

# Winter viral illnesses

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This factsheet provides basic information on common winter viral infections: colds, flu and winter vomiting disease. During the winter months most people, regardless of their HIV status, can expect to become unwell with colds or flu. On the whole you can expect to recover completely in a few days without any medical attention and with no lasting ill-effects.

Information is also included on secondary bacterial infections that can develop after having a cold or influenza, and the rare allergic reaction to abacavir (*Ziagen*, also in the combination pills *Kivexa* and *Trizivir*), the symptoms of which can resemble flu.

## The common cold

More than 200 viruses are known to cause common colds. The cold-causing virus can enter the body through the mouth or nose and by hand-to-hand contact and infects the upper respiratory tract. Cold symptoms usually start two or three days after infection and often include a runny nose, sneezing, a sore throat, a mild cough and headache. Temperature may rise slightly, but rarely above 38°C. As the body fights back against the virus causing the cold, the inside of the nose may start to swell and hurt, the nose run more and the skin feel sensitive.

## Influenza

Influenza (normally just called flu), is also a viral illness which infects the nose, throat, bronchial tubes, and lungs. There are two types of flu, influenza A and influenza B. Both are spread by coughing, sneezing and bodily contact when tiny amounts of the virus enter the body, normally through the nose or mouth.

Symptoms usually first appear a day or two after infection and can include tiredness, chills and fever, runny nose, sore throat and cough. Headache and muscle pain are also common and temperature can rise as high as 40°C. Normally you start to feel better after a few days, but it is not uncommon to feel weak or tired after having the flu for a week or so after your temperature has returned to normal and all your symptoms have disappeared.

## Winter vomiting illness

This illness involves nausea, vomiting, and diarrhoea. It is very contagious and can rapidly spread through families, schools and even hospital wards. It is caused by the Norovirus and people usually get better within 48 hours.

## Treatments

Antibiotics do not work against colds, flu or winter vomiting disease. The best treatment is likely to consist of rest, taking paracetamol or ibuprofen may help reduce temperature or discomfort, and drinking plenty of water and fluids, particularly if you are being sick frequently or have diarrhoea.

## Avoiding winter infections

Hand washing reduces the chance of picking up a winter viral infection. If you have a cold or cough then use a tissue and throw it away. Try to avoid spending too much time in the presence of people with sniffles, sneezes or coughs. Although some people find that some herbal or vitamin remedies either help them avoid catching colds and flu or recover quicker, there is no research evidence that these products are effective.

## Vaccines

Vaccinations against the flu are available from GPs, and one of the groups of people in the UK who can receive free NHS flu vaccinations are people with HIV. Flu vaccines are particularly recommended for people with a history of high risk of lung or heart disease.

## Secondary infections

Colds and flu do not 'turn into' bacterial infections like pneumonia, but some people do develop secondary bacterial infections, often in the sinuses, ears or lungs that require medical attention and antibiotic treatment.

These may be more likely to occur in people with weakened immune systems. If your symptoms last for more than a few days, become worse or if your temperature increases above 39°C you should see your doctor.

## Abacavir hypersensitivity

A dangerous allergic reaction to the anti-HIV drug abacavir (*Ziagen*, also in the combination pills *Kivexa* and *Trizivir*) has symptoms which resemble severe flu. Although this reaction can occur in people taking abacavir at any time, it is most likely to happen in the first few weeks of treatment. Symptoms include fever, rash, and muscle pain. The key difference with flu is the presence of nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea and if you think you are experiencing a reaction to abacavir you should contact a doctor immediately.