About Simple Colds, Influenza and Avian Flu

Q1. : How do i catch a cold?

A. : The viruses responsible for colds are spread from person to person as droplets in the air from sneezing or coughing, or from touching contaminated surfaces then transmitting the viruses from the hands to the mouth. Handshakes or touching a door handle are possible routes for transmission of cold viruses.

Infected people can spread the viruses from two days before the illness and up to four days after the symptoms start. Colds can occur all year round but are more common in the winter months. On average, adults catch two to three colds each year. School age children can have up to twelve or more colds in a year.

Q2. : What are the symptoms of catching a cold or flu?

A : Cold - The virus multiplies in the soft, warm surfaces found in the nose, throat, sinuses, the windpipe (trachea) and the breathing tubes (the bronchi). The main symptoms are blocked or runny nose, sneezing, sore throat and cough. There may also be symptoms of fever, aching muscles and fatigue. The symptoms usually last for a week.

Flu - These are the same as cold but the muscle aching is usually more severe and the fatigue may last for a few weeks after the illness has cleared up.

Q3. : What is the treatment towards cold or flu?

A : There is no cure for cold or flu. Antibiotics, which do work to kill bacteria, do not work on viruses. However, home treatment can help to relieve the symptoms and ensure a speedy recovery.

i. Drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration

ii. For adults, paracetamol, aspirin or ibuprofen can help to relieve fever and pain. Always follow the instructions carefully and stay within the safe daily doses. It is easy to accidentally exceed these by taking more than one product (tablets, capsules, a hot lemon drink) containing the same active ingredient such as paracetamol

iii. For children under 12 years old aspirin can be dangerous. It should also be avoided in older children and adolescents. Children's formulations of paracetamol (eg Calpol) and ibuprofen (Nurofen Junior) are available

iv. Avoid tobacco smoke

v. Decongestants such as pseudo-ephedrine may clear congestion. Ask your pharmacist for advice on products that contain a decongestant

vi. Steam inhalations with menthol or eucalyptus, or herbal products such as camomile, may help.

vii. Take balanced diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables. Vitamin C might help, but there is no firm evidence for this

viii. Rest and avoid strenuous exercise. Contrary to the advertising claims for some cold and flu medicines, if you are unwell with a heavy cold and, especially, flu, carrying on as normal is not advisable

Q4. : How to prevent from getting cold and flu?

A : i. Isolation of people with colds and flu to prevent it from spreading, if practical

ii. Regular hand washing and immediate disposal of tissues

iii. Aim for a healthy lifestyle, take a balanced diet rich in fruit and vegetables, and regular (preferably daily) physical activity

iv. Do not smoke since smokers are more likely to catch a cold

Q5.	:	What is the difference between cold and flu?
A	:	The flu and the common cold are both respiratory illnesses but they are caused by different viruses. In general, the flu is worse than the common cold, and flu symptoms are usually more severe such as fever, headache, body aches, extreme tiredness, sore throat, and dry cough are more common and intense. Cold is usually milder than the flu. People with cold are more likely to have a runny or stuffy nose. Cold generally do not result in serious health problems, such as pneumonia, bacterial infections, or hospitalizations. Because cold and flu share many symptoms, it can be difficult to tell the difference between them based on symptoms alone. Special tests that usually must be done within the first few days of illness can be carried out, when needed to tell if a person has the flu.
Q6.	:	Does cold weather cause the cold or flu?
A	:	The truth is, the flu and the common cold are caused by viruses. People get sick more often in the winter because they are exposed to each other more in the winter than in the summer. When it is cold outside, people tend to stay indoor and are more likely to spread germs to one another. With so many people in such close contact, the likelihood of passing germs is much higher.
Q7.		Would I be immune from all flu if I receive the flu vaccine?
A	:	The flu vaccine reduces the average person's chances of catching the flu by up to 80% during flu season. Because the vaccine prevents infection from only a few of the viruses that cause flu-like symptoms, it isn't a guarantee against getting sick. But even if someone who's gotten the vaccine gets the flu, symptoms usually will be fewer and milder. Flu vaccines contain killed flu viruses that will not cause the flu, but will prepare the body to fight off infection by the live flu virus. That means a person is protected against that particular type of live flu virus if he or she comes into contact with it. People who got the vaccine last year aren't protected from getting the flu this year because the protection wears off and flu viruses constantly change. That's why the vaccine is updated each year to include the most current strains of the virus. Getting the vaccine before the flu season is in full force gives the body a chance to build up immunity to, or protection from, the virus. Although you can get a flu vaccine well into flu season, it's better to try to get it earlier rather than later. However, even as late as January there are still 2 or 3 months left in the flu season, so it's still a good idea to get protection.
Q8.	:	What are the symptoms of avian influenza?
A	:	The symptoms include eye infection, flu-like symptoms (e.g. fever, cough, sore throat, muscle aches) or severe respiratory illness (e.g. chest infection). Infection of the more virulent forms, e.g. avian influenza A like H5N1, H5N6, H7N9 or H10N8 viruses, can result in respiratory failure, multi-organ failure and even death.
Q9.	:	What can I do to prevent avian influenza?
A	:	Taking the following preventive measures can definitely reduce the chance of contracting avian influenza:

i) Handling poultry

- Do not touch the live chickens particularly their droppings when buying or handling them. Do not blow at their bottoms. Wash eggs with household detergent if they are soiled with faecal matter or stained with dirt. Washed eggs should be cooked and consumed immediately. Always wash the hands thoroughly with liquid soap and water after handling chickens and eggs.
- Do not eat raw eggs or dip cooked food into sauce containing raw eggs. Although there is no evidence so far that avian influenza can be transmitted through eating poultry or eggs. It is important to make sure poultry and eggs have been thoroughly cooked before consumption.

ii) Personal hygiene

- Keep hands clean, wash hands frequently with liquid soap and water, especially before touching the mouth, nose, or eyes, before handling food or eating, and after going to toilet, touching public installations or equipment such as escalator handrails, elevator control panels or door knobs, or when hands are dirtied by respiratory secretion after coughing or sneezing.
- Cover the mouth and/or nose with tissue paper when coughing or sneezing. Dispose of the soiled tissues properly into a lidded rubbish bin, and then wash hands thoroughly.
- Wear a mask if developing fever or respiratory symptoms, going to a hospital or clinic, or if caring for a patient with fever or respiratory symptoms.
- If flu-like symptoms develop, stay at home and avoid going to crowded or poorly ventilated places.
- Good body resistance helps prevent infections including influenza. This can be achieved through a balanced diet, regular exercise and adequate rest, reducing stress and not smoking. Normally, extra supplement is not required.

iii) Environmental hygiene

- Maintain good indoor ventilation.
- Home should be cleaned thoroughly such as using 1 in 99 diluted household bleach (mixing 10 ml of bleach containing 5.25% sodium hypochlorite with 990 ml of water), at least once per week. For metallic surfaces, 70% alcohol should be used.
- U-trap should be prevented from drying up and drain outlets should be disinfected regularly about once a week.
- Repair immediately if there is defect in the U-trap or foul odour coming out from drain outlets. Qualified technicians can be hired for inspection and repair.

iv) Antiviral drugs

- Whether a doctor prescribes antiviral drugs (e.g. Tamiflu) to a patient will depend on the circumstances and health needs of the patient, taking into consideration the presence of any contraindication and balancing the benefits of taking the antiviral drugs against the possible adverse side effects. Indiscriminate use of antiviral drugs may give rise to drug resistance.
- Prophylaxis should be prescribed by registered doctors. Its effectiveness lasts as long as the drugs are being taken and ceases once the drugs are stopped. Self-medication is not encouraged because of the potential side effects and possibility of emergence of antiviral resistance.

v) Travel advice

- Avoid touching birds, poultry or their droppings and visiting poultry markets or farms when travelling outside Hong Kong.
- Travellers if feeling unwell when outside Hong Kong, especially if having a fever or cough, should wear a mask and inform the hotel staff or tour leader and seek medical advice at once.
- Travellers returning from affected areas with avian influenza outbreaks should consult doctors promptly if they have flu-like symptoms, and inform the doctor of the travel history and wear a mask to help prevent spread of the disease.

Q10 : Can I be protected against avian influenza by having influenza vaccination?

A : Currently, there is no vaccine to prevent avian influenza in humans.

Seasonal influenza vaccine cannot prevent avian influenza, however it can help reduce the chance of complications and hospitalization from seasonal influenza. Given influenza vaccines are safe and effective and that serious influenza infection can occur even in healthy individuals, seasonal influenza vaccination is suitable for personal protection against clinical influenza for all persons aged 6 months or above except those with known contraindications.