

FACT SHEET

Over-the-counter (non-prescription) medications for influenza

What is influenza?

Influenza is an infection of the lungs and airways caused by a virus. The most common influenza viruses are influenza Type A and influenza Type B. In North America, influenza usually affects people between November and April.

Symptoms include sudden fever, chills, headache, body aches and extreme tiredness. Sore throat and a runny or stuffed nose are also common. Most people get better within a week. However, people with long-term health problems or those with weaker body defenses such as the very young, elderly and those on certain medications, may have serious complications such as pneumonia or worsening of their health condition(s).

Immunization is the best way to avoid getting influenza or to lessen its severity. In addition, the single most important way to prevent influenza is frequent hand washing.

How to care for yourself if you have influenza

- Rest.
- Avoid contact with others while you are contagious (five days), if possible.
- Drink extra fluids.
- Gargle with warm salt water and/or use salt-water nose drops.
- Use a humidifier.
- Do not smoke, and avoid second-hand smoke.

Most people can treat influenza symptoms with over-the-counter (OTC) medications, as long as they follow certain guidelines.

Talk to your pharmacist about what product to use, dosage, possible side effects, and conditions when you should not use the remedy.

Guidelines for using over-the-counter medications

- To prevent adverse reactions or taking extra medication that will have little or no effect, use an OTC remedy that treats only one symptom and/or has only one active ingredient.
- If you are taking more than one medication at a time, check the labels to avoid taking the same ingredient twice.
- Try “regular strength” products before “extra strength.”
- Follow instructions on the label. Note possible side effects or drug/health conditions when the medication should not be used.
- Check the expiry date on medications in your home. Take outdated medications to a pharmacy for disposal.
- Keep all medications out of reach of children.

How to treat specific symptoms in adults

Muscle pain and fever:

- Use acetaminophen (the best choice for older adults), for example Tylenol®. If you take acetaminophen for a long time or in high doses, it can affect the liver and kidneys.
- Ibuprofen, for example Advil® or Motrin®, is an alternative. Ibuprofen can irritate the stomach.

Children under eighteen should NOT take acetylsalicylic acid (ASA), for example Aspirin® or any products containing ASA. Combined with influenza, ASA can cause Reye's Syndrome, a very serious condition affecting the nervous system and liver.

Cough: Try a medication with Dextromethorphan (DM) for a dry cough that prevents you from sleeping or causes chest discomfort. Delsym® and Benylin-Dry Cough® contain DM (without other ingredients).

OVER-THE-COUNTER (NON-PRESCRIPTION) MEDICATIONS FOR INFLUENZA

Stuffy nose: Use a decongestant. Nose drops or sprays act quickly and have fewer side effects than medications you take by mouth but should only be used for two to three days to avoid rebound congestion. If stuffy nose continues consider an oral medication such as pseudoephedrine. Decongestants may cause dry mouth, sleep problems, rapid heartbeat or other side effects. People who have long-term health problems or who are on other medications should not take decongestants without talking to a health-care provider.

Sore throat: Try lozenges or throat sprays. Dyclonine (for example Sucrets®) works best to numb the throat. Products containing honey, herbs or pectin soothe the throat.

How to treat specific symptoms in children

Treat influenza symptoms in children with OTC medications only if necessary.

Muscle pain and fever: Acetaminophen (for example Tylenol®) is best. You may try ibuprofen (for example Motrin®) instead, but do not use it for babies less than four months old. Take the child's temperature before giving medication for fever. Do not wake a child to give the medication.

Cough: Use a cough suppressant (DM) for a dry cough in children over two years old, but only if the cough is disturbing the child's sleep. Do not use DM for a moist cough or for children with asthma.

Stuffy nose: Saline nose drops, such as Salinex®, may help a stuffy nose and cough. You may use decongestant sprays for children older than six months, and oral decongestants for older children, if needed.

Sore throat: Throat lozenges or a warm salt water gargle may help children older than six years.

What about complementary medicines?

Many people use complementary medicines to support their health. Find out all you can about these medicines before you take them. Use as directed and with the same precautions as you would with other OTC medications. For example, echinacea is unsafe for people with autoimmune diseases (including type 1 diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis and multiple

sclerosis), suppressed immune systems and certain allergies.

There is some research that shows complementary medicines (see list) may help shorten influenza illness or lessen its severity:

- vitamins E and C.
- COLD-fX®, a ginseng-based remedy developed in Edmonton.
- an echinacea herbal tea (Echinacea Plus®).
- an extract of elderberry (Sambucol®).
- quercetin, a bioflavonoid that occurs naturally in fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds, red wine, tea and flowers.
- Bifidobacterium breve, which occurs naturally in the intestinal tract and in yogurt.
- homeopathic Oscillococcinum.
- ginglyo-san, a traditional Chinese herbal medicine.
- Kan Jang (standardized extract of Andrographis paniculata).

Be sure to tell your health-care provider about any OTC or complementary medicines you are taking.

For more information contact:

Health Link Alberta

Edmonton, call 408-LINK (5465)

Calgary, call 943-LINK (5465)

Outside Edmonton and Calgary local calling areas, call toll-free 1-866-408-LINK (5465)

visit: www.healthlinkalberta.ca

Public Health Centres

(Monday - Friday, daytime hours), or
physicians or pharmacists

Alberta Health and Wellness

visit: www.health.gov.ab.ca

(Contact information)

INFLUENZA SELF-CARE



Alberta