

Prevention is the key to staying well over the cooler months

Artarmon GP, **Dr Doug Hor**, has some useful comments and tips for staying healthy this winter and into spring. "Colder weather reduces a person's ability to fight the common cold. This is the time of year when we see more coughs and colds and some influenza. It is important to follow a few simple points in order for the immune system to be able to do its job," Dr Hor said.

Tips include:

- cover your mouth when sneezing or coughing
- keep your hands away from your eyes, nose and mouth
- use paper tissues to blow your nose, and throw tissues away after use
- wash hands with soap, particularly before preparing and eating food and after blowing your nose
- maintain healthy eating habits ie: eating foods from all five food groups, and avoiding foods with a high fat content
- continue to exercise, despite the cold, and dress appropriately for the conditions
- if you are feeling unwell, don't soldier on at work – stay at home to prevent spreading any infection
- people over 65 or those with a chronic medical condition should have the flu shot and the pneumococcal vaccine – it is not too late in the season to have this shot.

The National Prescribing Service also offers useful information on how to stay healthy, including:

Is it a common cold or seasonal flu?

Common colds are infections of the

respiratory tract and usually last 7–10 days. Symptoms can include sneezing, a blocked or runny nose, a sore throat and coughing. Green or yellow mucus may come from the nose; this is a sign that the immune system is fighting the infection and does not mean the cold is getting worse. Fever is generally mild if it does occur.

Seasonal influenza (flu) usually affects people during the winter months of June to September and lasts 2–7 days. The flu viruses that circulate every winter are often similar to those from the preceding winter, so there is already a level of immunity (body defenses) in the community. Seasonal flu most commonly affects the very young or the elderly.

Seasonal flu usually starts suddenly with a high fever and you may feel sick enough to go to bed. Symptoms can also include irritation in the throat or lungs, a dry cough, shivering, sweating and severe muscle aches. The flu tends to make the whole body ache, whereas the common cold usually affects the nose and throat only.

The symptoms of **swine flu** are similar to normal seasonal flu symptoms and most commonly include fever, cough, sore throat, fatigue, body aches, headache and chills.

Treatment options if you have seasonal flu:

If you have seasonal flu, stay at home, drink plenty of fluids, get lots of rest and take pain relief if you need it for aches and pains.

Keep a close watch on people with seasonal flu and seek medical advice if their condition

deteriorates. Some people are at greater risk of severe complications, such as those with chronic medical conditions. These people should see their healthcare provider immediately if they develop seasonal flu symptoms.

Treatment options if you do catch a cold:

Once you have a cold there's not a lot you can do. Antibiotics work only on bacteria—they don't work on the viruses that cause common colds, so they won't help common colds get better faster, won't stop cold symptoms getting worse, and won't stop colds spreading to others. Using antibiotics when you don't need to contributes to the development and spread of bacterial resistance to antibiotics. This makes antibiotics less effective when they really are needed for serious infections.

The best thing to do is stay at home, drink plenty of fluids that don't contain caffeine, get lots of rest and take pain relief if you need it for aches and pains. If you get worse after about two days, or experience different symptoms like vomiting or diarrhoea, or have other chronic conditions you should see your doctor.

Some cold and flu tablets contain pain relief ingredients like codeine, so if you take them make sure you don't double up by taking additional pain relief medicines. While cold and flu tablets may relieve the symptoms they don't actually work on the virus and do not change the duration of the cold. Many people experience side effects from cold and flu medicines and they are not recommended for children. ■