

Stay well this winter



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Winter conditions can be seriously bad for our health, especially for people aged 65 or older and people with long-term health conditions such as heart or kidney disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (including emphysema and chronic bronchitis), asthma or diabetes. Being cold can raise the risk of increased blood pressure, heart attacks and strokes.

The cold, damp weather, ice, snow and high winds can all aggravate any existing health problems, increase the risk of a fall, and make us more vulnerable to respiratory winter illnesses. But there are lots of things you can do to stay well this winter.

Get your winter vaccines

During the colder winter months when people stay indoors for longer (often in larger groups) there is an increase in the number of people experiencing coughs, colds and flu-like illnesses. While most people with these illnesses will recover at home, some people are at greater risk of serious illness.

People who need extra protection are offered flu and COVID-19 vaccinations ahead of winter each year. Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) and pneumonia are also more common in the winter and you may be eligible for vaccinations to protect against these viruses. If you are eligible for vaccinations, getting them is the best

way to protect yourself and your family over the winter months.

The flu vaccine is available for free for older adults, residents in a care home, people with underlying health conditions and pregnant women. Children, carers, care home staff and health and social care workers are also eligible.

It's important to get vaccinated if you are eligible, even if you have had a previous flu vaccination or have had the flu virus, as protection will fade and the virus can change over time. Find out more about the flu vaccine and who can get it for free at www.nidirect.gov.uk/flu-vaccine

COVID-19 is now a mild disease for most people. Adults aged 75 years and over, all residents in a care home for older adults and people with a weakened immune system are at greater risk of serious illness from COVID-19. They are being offered the free COVID-19 vaccine.



See www.nidirect.gov.uk/covid-vaccine for more information.

The RSV vaccine is available all year round for people aged 75 years or older and adults of any age living in a care home for older adults, who have previously not received the RSV vaccine. Most people will only need one dose and this can be given at any time in the year. If you are eligible and haven't been vaccinated, it's important to get the vaccine as soon as possible as the RSV virus is more common during winter.

Pregnant women are also eligible for the RSV vaccine in each pregnancy, around 28 weeks, to protect their unborn baby against RSV.

For most people RSV causes a mild respiratory illness with cold-like symptoms, but for babies under one year and older adults there is a significant risk of severe infection, which could result in being taken to hospital.

For more information, visit www.nidirect.gov.uk/rsv-older-adult or www.nidirect.gov.uk/rsv-pregnancy

Also, don't forget if you're aged 65 or over, or have certain health conditions, you are eligible for the pneumococcal vaccine, which will help protect you from pneumococcal diseases such as pneumonia. Most adults need only one dose of the vaccine. For more information, contact your local GP surgery.

Check your symptoms

You can check your symptoms and find out more about a range of conditions by searching online for 'nidirect health conditions A-Z'.

Here are a few guidelines to help you judge how long some common illnesses and symptoms could last up to.

Common illnesses	Most people are better by
Earache (middle ear infection)	7 to 8 days
Sore throat	7 to 8 days
Sinusitis (adults only)	21 to 28 days
Common cold	14 days
Cough or bronchitis	21 to 28 days
Norovirus (winter vomiting)	2 to 3 days

If you are not starting to improve by these guide times, contact your GP.

How to look after yourself

Self-care is often the best way to treat minor illnesses. Remember, whether treated or not, most of these illnesses will get better in time.

How you can treat a common infection:

- keep warm;
- get plenty of rest until you feel better;
- drink plenty of fluids (your urine should be light yellow or clear);
- have at least one hot meal a day to keep up your energy levels;
- take over-the-counter medications, if you need to (make sure you follow the instructions).

Many over-the-counter medicines (including paracetamol and ibuprofen) are available to relieve symptoms of common winter ailments such as colds, sore throat, cough, sinusitis or painful middle ear infection (earache).

It's a good idea to ask your pharmacist what medicines should be in your cabinet to help get you and your family through the winter season.

Before going to your GP, it is also worth speaking to your pharmacist. Pharmacists are qualified to give advice about different health matters, including minor illnesses. If your symptoms suggest it's something more serious, they can tell you if you need to see a GP or go to the Emergency Department.

If you can't get to a pharmacy or if you have symptoms that you think you could pass on, stay at home and give your pharmacist a call or ask someone to go in for you.

Prescription medicines

If you've been prescribed antibiotics, make sure you take them as directed. Never share antibiotics or keep them for later use. Your pharmacist can safely dispose of any unwanted or out-of-date medicines.

Remember, if you are feeling unwell, antibiotics are not always needed so you shouldn't expect them to be prescribed. Taking them when they are not needed can make you feel worse. You could end up with unnecessary side effects, such as diarrhoea and feeling sick.

Some antibiotics only work for specific infections or conditions, and taking them when they are not needed can cause harmful bacteria inside you to become resistant. Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) means antibiotics may not work when you need them, putting you and your family at risk of a more severe or longer illness. In the same way that we can spread infections, resistant bacteria can spread to others, including family members and loved ones.

You should take your GP or pharmacist's advice and only take antibiotics when you need them. To learn more, visit www.nidirect.gov.uk/antibiotic-resistance

Practise good hygiene

Washing your hands with soap and water is one of the easiest ways to protect yourself and others from catching many viruses.

Washing your hands properly removes dirt, viruses and bacteria to stop them spreading to other people and objects. This can help stop the spread of common winter infections. Hand washing is particularly important when you're visiting someone in hospital or another healthcare setting. If you do not have access to soap and water, then use alcohol-based hand sanitiser.

Also, remember to cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing and dispose of it quickly and carefully in a bin.

Keep warm

Keeping warm over the winter months can help to prevent colds, flu and more serious health problems such as heart attacks, strokes and pneumonia.

Heat your main living room to around 18-21°C (64-70°F) and the rest of the house to at least 16°C (61°F). If you can't heat all your rooms, make sure you heat the main room you use

throughout the day and heat your bedroom before going to bed.

There are some simple things you can do to help keep yourself and your home warm.

- Wear several layers of light clothes – this will keep you warmer than one thicker layer.
- Keep your bedroom windows closed at night.
- Reduce draughts by closing doors and fitting draught excluders.
- Make sure you are eating enough and having hot drinks.

Stay active and stay in touch

Staying active is good for your health. Regular exercise can help improve your physical and mental health, reduce the risk of falling and can be beneficial for recovery if you do get ill.

If the weather prevents you getting outside, there are many activities you can do at home. For tips and ideas, go to www.choosetolivebetter.com/getting-active

Stay in contact with friends and family, especially if you've been stuck in the house for a few days. Remember that other people, such as older family members, friends or neighbours, may need a bit of extra help over the winter. Keep in touch with them and offer practical help.



Mental health support

We all feel down at times, but if it's affecting your life, there are things you can try that might help. For information, advice and support services, visit www.mindingyourhead.info

If you need more support, make an appointment with your GP.

If you or someone you know is in distress or crisis, call Lifeline for free on 0808 808 8000. Trained counsellors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

If you or someone else is in immediate danger of suicide or you require urgent medical attention, call 999.

Serious illness

These symptoms are possible signs of serious illness and should be assessed by a health professional urgently:

1. If your skin is very cold or has a strange colour or you develop an unusual rash.
2. If you feel confused or have slurred speech or are very drowsy.
3. If you have difficulty breathing. Signs can include:

- breathing quickly;
- turning blue around the lips and the skin below the mouth;
- skin between or above the ribs getting sucked or pulled in with every breath.

4. If you develop a severe headache and are sick.
5. If you develop chest pain.
6. If you have difficulty swallowing or are drooling.
7. If you cough up blood.
8. If you are passing very little urine or no urine.
9. If you are feeling a lot worse.

If you, your child or someone you know has any of these symptoms, are getting worse or are sicker than you would expect (even if your/their temperature falls), trust your instincts and seek medical attention urgently.

If a child under the age of five has any of symptoms 1–3, go to the Emergency Department immediately or call 999.



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