



Ask Doctor Dr Karuhanga



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Why do I always get flu when it is chilly?

I tend to get the flu whenever it is cold in the morning or at night, but flu medicine has not helped. What else can I do to prevent it? Isabella

Dear Isabella,

Flu, short for influenza, is a highly contagious infection of the airways, including the nose, throat, lungs, and passages connecting them, caused primarily by influenza viruses, most commonly types A and B. This illness can be quite severe, often resulting in sudden high fever, weakness, body aches, and a cough. It spreads through airborne droplets, and flu can lead to serious complications such as pneumonia, which can be fatal. This is why, in many countries where the flu occurs during the winter months, vaccinations are typically administered.

What people often refer to as the flu is actually more likely to be a common cold. A cold is a viral infection characterised by symptoms such as a stuffy or runny nose, sneezing, sore throat, and sometimes a cough, headache, and fatigue. Despite being called a cold it is not



caused by low temperatures; rather, it results from more than 200 different viral infections that thrive in colder weather. Rhinoviruses and coronaviruses (not the one causing Covid-19) are the most frequent culprits behind these infections.

Since colds can be caused by many different viruses, immunity developed against one may not protect against others. Additionally, because colds are highly contagious, they can

spread rapidly, making them very common.

Treatment for the common cold is challenging because it is caused by viruses that cannot be cured. However, adequate rest, plenty of warm fluids (such as unsalted chicken soup, which contains acetylcysteine that helps loosen mucus for easier expulsion), nasal saline sprays, and pain relievers such as Panadol can provide some relief.

Cold weather is known to exacerbate nasal and other allergies. Symptoms from these allergies can sometimes be mistaken for a common cold, even though they are different issues. Many people tend to stay indoors at night or during cold weather, making them more susceptible to indoor allergens, such as dust mites and mould, which can cause a runny nose and other problems, including asthma.

Moreover, cold temperatures can cause nasal blood vessels to swell, leading to congestion and sneezing, a condition called non-allergic rhinitis, originally known as vasomotor rhinitis. Symptoms may resemble those of flu, but they are not the same. To alleviate discomfort, it is advisable to avoid cold substances, such as icy drinks and ice cream, and to use saline drops or sprays for the nose.

Given the various potential causes of your symptoms, it is essential to consult a doctor for proper evaluation and advice.



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