



The Facts about Colds and Flu

Myth: You can catch a cold by being out in the elements too long.

You have probably heard the old warning that going outside in chilly weather, and staying there too long, can make you "catch" a cold. Not true, says D.J. Verret, MD, an otolaryngologist in Dallas. "Going outside -- with or without a wet head -- is one of the best things you can do to *prevent* catching a cold. Actually, being cold has nothing to do with your risk of catching a cold. Colds are caused by viruses or bacteria which are more often spread in the winter because of close contact from everyone being indoors."

That's right, spending time *outdoors* can make you less susceptible to those nasty germs.

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How a Common Cold Starts

You can catch a common cold from another person who is infected with the virus. This usually happens by touching a surface contaminated with cold germs -- a computer keyboard, doorknob, or eating utensil, for example -- and then touching your nose or mouth. You can also catch a cold by encountering secretions someone with a cold has sneezed into the air.

While getting chilled or wet is not a cause of common colds, there are factors that make you more susceptible to catching a cold virus. For example, you are more likely to catch a common cold if you are excessively fatigued, have emotional distress, or have allergies with nose and throat symptoms.

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Asthma, viruses and the flu

The common cold causes up to 80% of reported asthma attacks and is commonly spread through the air or on hard surfaces when the infected person coughs or sneezes.

Influenza (flu) is caused by one particular virus. There are several forms of the flu virus, and each can change over time. Flu causes only a small percentage of asthma attacks.

How does cold, damp weather affect asthma?

Asthma is a lung complaint that narrows the airways, making breathing difficult. The body responding to an allergy generally triggers an asthma attack, but cold, damp air can make breathing difficult for those with asthma. During the winter months, anyone diagnosed with asthma should take special care to wrap up well and take their prescribed medicine or inhaler regularly.

Winter can expose people with asthma to a number of potential triggers. Cold and damp weather may instigate an attack, or at best make breathing more difficult than in warmer months. There is a greater likelihood of catching a cold during winter, and this can make breathing hard for those with asthma. Cold weather drives us indoors, and exposure to indoor triggers of asthma increase the chance of suffering an attack. The drying effect of central heating and efficient insulation may also contribute to triggering an asthma attack.

If the cold weather is a definite trigger to asthma attacks, taking two puffs of your 'reliever' inhaler (the blue one containing a bronchodilator) may be helpful in preventing an attack. Those with asthma are advised to consult their GP before the onset of cold weather to discuss if their asthma treatment should be changed to account for the wintry weather.

[Asthma Australia.org.au](http://AsthmaAustralia.org.au)