Managing cold and flu during the COVID-19 pandemic

Cold and flu share some symptoms and, if managed effectively, are often self-limiting and resolve within a couple of weeks in people without pre-existing conditions. However, as winter approaches, given the potential overlap of symptoms with COVID-19, patients may be concerned about the cause. This resource highlights the main differences between the symptoms of colds, flu and COVID-19, to enable pharmacy teams to appropriately advise, treat or refer patients.

PHARMACY CONSULTATIONS

**STEP 1**

**Rule out possible COVID-19 infection**

**History of current illness**
- Date of symptom onset
- Suspect COVID-19 if patient has one of the following symptoms:
  - High temperature;
  - New, continuous cough;
  - Loss or change in smell or taste.

**Contacts**
Determine if the patient has:
- Had contact with known COVID-19 case;
- An immediate family member who is unwell.

**Ask:** “How suddenly did the symptoms begin?”

**Ask:** “Is anyone you live with unwell or has anyone you have had close contact with tested positive for COVID-19 or had symptoms of COVID-19 in the past 14 days?”

**Determine whether the patient’s symptoms are indicative of COVID-19 or if they are a known contact of a confirmed case (follow Step 2) or if other viral infections such as cold or flu are suspected (see Step 3).”

**COMPARISON OF COVID-19, FLU AND COLD SYMPTOMS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COVID-19 (symptoms range from mild to severe)</th>
<th>Flu (rapid onset of symptoms)</th>
<th>Cold (gradual onset of symptoms)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aches and pains</td>
<td>Cough</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diarrhoea</td>
<td>Fatigue</td>
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<tr>
<td>Headaches</td>
<td>Fever or chills</td>
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<td>Nausea or vomiting</td>
<td>Loss of taste or smell</td>
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<td>Shortness of breath</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sore throat</td>
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</table>

**Sources:** NHS inform; NHS; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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COVID-19 suspected

If the patient has COVID-19 symptoms

Advises them:
- To book a COVID test — www.gov.uk/get-coronavirus-test
- To call 119 (England, Wales, or Northern Ireland) or 0300 300 2713 (Scotland)6;
- That they and their household/support bubble should self-isolate while awaiting test results1;
- If they present directly to pharmacy, follow NHS standard operating procedure6.

If the patient has been in contact with someone with suspected COVID-19 or who has tested positive

Advises them:
- To self-isolate at home for 14 days from the date of their last contact with that person, even if they are not displaying symptoms3;
- That their household does not need to self-isolate if they do not have symptoms of COVID-19. Follow guidance on social distancing, handwashing, and respiratory hygiene6;
- If the patient develops symptoms while self-isolating, they should stay at home for at least ten days from when their symptoms started and arrange a COVID test22;
- If they do not develop symptoms of COVID-19, testing is not required.

Other viral infection suspected

If COVID-19 is ruled out, it is important to consider whether the patient has a cold or flu, then to ensure they do not have symptoms that would warrant further investigation before recommending treatment.

Colds

- Symptoms appear gradually;
- Generally, patients feel unwell but can continue daily activities;
- Symptoms typically resolve within 7–14 days6.

Influenza

- Symptoms appear quickly (within a few hours);
- Symptoms in children are similar but may also include: — Ear pain — Lower activity;
- Generally, patients will feel exhausted and will be too unwell to continue daily activities;
- Symptoms typically resolve within 7–14 days6.

If a patient does self-present with cold or flu symptoms pharmacy teams should ask:
- “Have you recently been in contact with someone with the flu?”;
- “Have you been vaccinated against the flu?”;
- “How suddenly did your symptoms begin?”;
- “Are you able to smell and taste as normal?”

Recommend options for effective symptom management

- When appropriate, reassure patients that symptoms are not indicative of COVID-19 and that isolation and testing are not necessary;
- Provide the antimicrobial stewardship message that viral infections are not treated with antibiotics;
- Discuss pharmacological options, including available pharmacy (P) and over the counter (OTC) products and medicines that may help relieve symptoms;
- Recommend that the patient receives the flu vaccine before next year’s flu season — explain that contracting it this year does not confer immunity next year.

OUTLINE APPROPRIATE INFECTION CONTROL MEASURES

- Hand hygiene
- Throw away used tissues
- Stay at home to recover
- Avoid touching nose, eyes, and mouth
- Wear a face covering in enclosed spaces

PROVIDE INFORMATION ON SELF-CARE MEASURES

- Drink hot drinks
- Maintain fluid intake
- Take time to rest
- Stay at home to recover
- P and OTC products

Close the consultation

- Check the patient understands and is happy with the management plan;
- Provide the patient with an opportunity to ask questions;
- Reassure the patient they can contact the pharmacy if they have any concerns;
- Remind the patient of normal symptom durations and check they know when to seek further help (e.g., if symptoms worsen or if they experience difficulty breathing).

If a patient has symptoms:

- Advises them:
- To book a COVID test — www.gov.uk/get-coronavirus-test
- To call 119 (England, Wales, or Northern Ireland) or 0300 300 2713 (Scotland)6;
- That they and their household/support bubble should self-isolate while awaiting test results1;
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THE FOLLOWING FACTORS MAY REQUIRE REFERRAL:
- Are you young or very old (>65 years of age);
- Are pregnant or breastfeeding;
- Have a long-term condition or are immunocompromised;
- Experience chest pain, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing or have blood in their sputum;
- Have an unusual rash;
- Symptoms worsen or there is no improvement after seven days.

Professional judgement should be used to manage these patients, including referral or consultation with the patient’s GP.