

# 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.<sup>1</sup>

**Ask:** "How suddenly did the symptoms begin?"

##### Contacts

- Determine if the patient has:
- Had contact with known COVID-19 case;
  - An immediate family member who is unwell;<sup>2</sup>

**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

● Rare ● Sometimes ● Common ✕ Not a symptom

	COVID-19 (symptoms range from mild to severe)	Flu (rapid onset of symptoms)	Cold (gradual onset of symptoms)	COVID-19 (symptoms range from mild to severe)	Flu (rapid onset of symptoms)	Cold (gradual onset of symptoms)
Aches and pains	●	●	●	●	●	●
Diarrhoea	●	● <i>especially in children</i>	✕	●	●	●
Headaches	●	●	●	●	●	●
Nausea or vomiting	●	●	✕	●	●	●
Shortness of breath	●	✕	✕	●	●	●
Sore throat	●	●	●	●	●	●
Cough	●	●	●	●	●	●
Fatigue	●	●	●	●	●	●
Fever or chills	●	●	●	●	●	●
Loss of taste or smell	● <i>Sudden</i>	●	●	●	●	●
Runny or stuffy nose	●	●	●	●	●	●
Sneezing	✕	●	●	✕	●	●

Sources: NHS inform<sup>1</sup>; NHS<sup>2</sup>; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention<sup>3,4</sup>



## STEP 2

### COVID-19 suspected

#### If the patient has COVID-19 symptoms

Advise them:

- To book a COVID test — [www.gov.uk/get-coronavirus-test](http://www.gov.uk/get-coronavirus-test)<sup>7</sup>
- Call 119 (England, Wales or Northern Ireland) or 0300 303 2713 (Scotland)<sup>8</sup>;
- That they and their household/support bubble should self-isolate while awaiting test results<sup>7</sup>;
- If the patient presented directly to pharmacy, follow NHS standard operating procedure<sup>9</sup>.

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

Advise 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 symptoms<sup>2</sup>;
- 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 hygiene<sup>2</sup>;
- 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 test<sup>2,7</sup>;
- If they do not develop symptoms of COVID-19, testing is not required.



#### COVID-19 vaccines

As the UK vaccine roll-out begins, pharmacists can keep up-to-date with developments at: [pharmaceutical-journal.com](http://pharmaceutical-journal.com)

## STEP 3

### 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 days<sup>3</sup>.

#### 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 days<sup>4</sup>.



#### 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?"*

#### THE FOLLOWING FACTORS MAY REQUIRE REFERRAL:

- Are 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<sup>3,4</sup>.

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

## STEP 4

### 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<sup>3,4,11</sup>



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

## STEP 5

### 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).

Pharmacy has been pivotal to the COVID-19 pandemic response and will ensure patients are appropriately managed when they present with a viral infection this winter. Ensuring the entire team are confident about the advice they provide to patients will help ensure best patient outcomes.

1. NHS. Coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms. 2020. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/symptoms/> (accessed December 2020). 2. NHS England. Guidance for contacts of people with confirmed coronavirus (COVID-19) infection who do not live with the person. 2020. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-contacts-of-people-with-possible-or-confirmed-coronavirus-covid-19-infection-who-do-not-live-with-the-person> (accessed December 2020). 3. NHS Inform. Common cold. 2020. Available at: <https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/common-cold> (accessed December 2020). 4. NHS. Flu. 2019. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/flu/> (accessed December 2020). 5. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Symptoms of coronavirus. 2020. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html> (accessed December 2020). 6. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Cold versus flu. 2020. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/symptoms/coldflu.htm> (accessed December 2020). 7. UK Government. Get a free NHS test today to check if you have coronavirus. 2020. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/get-coronavirus-test> (accessed December 2020). 8. NHS. Your coronavirus test result. 2020. Available at: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/testing-and-tracing/what-your-test-result-means/> (accessed December 2020). 9. NHS England and NHS Improvement. Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) standard operating procedure. 2020. Available from: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/wp-content/uploads/sites/52/2020/03/Novel-coronavirus-COVID-19-standard-operating-procedure-Community-Pharmacy-v2-published-22-March-2020.pdf> (accessed December 2020). 10. Covid-19 pandemic. The Pharmaceutical Journal. Available at: <https://www.pharmaceutical-journal.com/news-and-analysis/special-reports/special-report-covid-19-pandemic/> (accessed December 2020). 11. UK Government. Face coverings: when to wear one, exemptions, and how to make your own. 2020. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/face-coverings-when-to-wear-one-and-how-to-make-your-own> (accessed December 2020).