



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.

Most people with flu and COVID-19 recover at home, but these viruses can make some people seriously ill. Those at greater risk of serious

illness from these diseases, such as older adults, residents in care homes for older adults, people with certain underlying health conditions and pregnant women, are invited to get the free flu and COVID-19 vaccinations. Those who may pass the viruses on to people at risk are also encouraged to get vaccinated.

Vaccines are the most effective way to prevent infectious diseases as they teach our immune system how to recognise and fight viruses. They are safe, effective and free for all those in the eligible groups.

It's important to get vaccinated if you are eligible, even if you have had



previous flu and COVID-19 vaccinations or have had one or both of the viruses, as protection will fade and both viruses can change over time. Find out more about the flu and COVID-19 vaccines and who can get them for free at www.nidirect.gov.uk/winter-vaccines

Pregnant women and adults aged from 75-79 years can get vaccinated against Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV). People aged 80 years old and over can get the vaccine up to and including 31 August 2025. 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. To find out more about the RSV vaccine and how to get it, visit www.nidirect.gov.uk/rsv-older-adult or www.nidirect.gov.uk/rsv-pregnancy

Also, don't forget that 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. For more information, contact your local GP surgery or visit www.nidirect.gov.uk/conditions/pneumonia

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 should last for.

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

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

How to self-care

Self-care is often the best choice to treat minor illnesses. Common winter illnesses like those in the table can be treated with over-the-counter medications. Remember, whether treated or not, most of these illnesses will get better.

How you can treat a common infection:

- keep warm;
- get plenty of rest until you feel better;
- drink plenty of fluids (your pee should be light yellow or clear);
- have at least one hot meal a day to keep your energy levels up;
- 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. They are qualified to give advice about different health matters, including minor illnesses. If your symptoms suggest it's something more serious, pharmacists can tell you if you need to see a GP or go to the Emergency Department.

If you can't get to a pharmacy to speak to a pharmacist 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

Make sure you order any prescription medicines and collect them before your GP practice and pharmacy close for any bank holidays.

If you've been prescribed antibiotics or any other medication, 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 to be prescribed them. Taking antibiotics when they are not needed can make you feel worse. You could end up with unnecessary side effects, such as diarrhoea and feeling sick. It also puts you at risk of a more severe or longer infection.

Some antibiotics only work for specific infections or conditions, and taking antibiotics when they are not needed can reduce their effectiveness over time. This is called antimicrobial resistance (AMR).

You should take your GP or pharmacist's advice and only take antibiotics when you need them.

To learn more about AMR and how to use antibiotics properly to keep them working, visit www.nidirect.gov.uk/antibiotic-resistance



Practice 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, and 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 immediate 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

It is important to keep warm in winter – both inside and outdoors. 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.
- Try to reduce draughts by closing doors and fitting draught excluders.

- Make sure you are eating enough and having hot drinks.



You can find out more by searching online for 'nidirect keep warm'.

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 to keep active. 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 from time to time, 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.

Lifeline
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 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 advice urgently from your GP.

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



Public Health Agency

Public Health Agency

12-22 Linenhall Street, Belfast BT2 8BS.

Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate).

www.publichealth.hscni.net

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