

Exercising  
with

# colds and flu

Advice on whether you should exercise during illness depends to some extent on your symptoms. This leaflet contains some basic advice you can use to help you to decide whether you should or shouldn't exercise during this time.

## PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND THE IMMUNE SYSTEM

A growing number of research studies are consistently showing that people who participate in regular physical activity suffer from fewer colds than inactive people. Research has shown that moderate exercise causes a boost in the immune system which appears to reduce the risk of infection in the long-term.

However the age old adage applies, everything is best in moderation. There is also well-established evidence that high intensity exercise can suppress your immune system and leave you at greater risk of infection so heavy weights or high heart rate cardiovascular training are definitely not advisable when you're feeling unwell.

## SHOULD YOU EXERCISE IF YOU FEEL UNWELL?

Research has shown that moderate exercise when you have a cold does not appear to affect the severity or the duration of the cold. Added to which it is likely that if you are suffering from a cold you will feel better if you take some mild activity such as going for a short walk, than if you sat in a stuffy room watching TV. However there are different circumstances when you should and shouldn't take exercise if you are feeling unwell. These are summarised by the 'neck check' rule.

## THE 'NECK CHECK' RULE

If you don't have a fever and your symptoms occur above the neck, such as a being stuffed-up, having a runny nose, sneezing or a light sore throat it should be fine for you to exercise. Begin by exercising for 10 minutes lightly (at a much lower intensity than your usual session) and if you feel better during this 10 minutes, continue to exercise lightly. If you feel worse then it is advisable to stop exercising and give your body a chance to recover from the illness.

If your symptoms are cold-like and not flu-like it is safe to resume intensive sessions a few days after the symptoms have disappeared.

If however you have more flu-like symptoms such as a fever or your symptoms are below the neck such as chest congestion, vomiting, aching muscles, diarrhoea or swollen glands, then you should not work out that day. Under these circumstances your cardiovascular system is likely to already be under stress combating the infection and exercise will only increase this stress and possibly lengthen your recovery time. If you are still unsure whether the cause of your illness is a cold or flu and you are not sure whether you can exercise, consult your GP.

If you have flu-like symptoms such as extreme tiredness, aching muscles, and a fever it is best not to resume full intensity training for at least 2-4 weeks after the symptoms have gone because although you may feel better, your body is likely to need more time to recover. During this time it should be OK to do mild to moderate intensity exercise.

## TREATING COLDS AND FLU

Colds and flu are both caused by viral infections of the respiratory tract and figures suggest that the average adult suffers 2-3 of these infections each year with children suffering more than double this amount. The bad news is there is very little you can do to speed your recovery from a cold once you have one. As antibiotics are only effective in the treatment of bacteria and colds and flu are



caused by viruses, there is absolutely nothing to be gained from taking antibiotics in these circumstances.

There are plenty of over-the-counter medications aimed at making you feel more comfortable but nothing that will get rid of the infection for you other than your own immune system.

## Prevention

As you are unable to do much to speed recovery once you've caught a cold the best thing you can do is try to avoid colds in the first place by making sure your immune system is the most resilient it can be.

The immune system has been shown to be affected by a number of factors such as stress, age, lack of sleep, smoking and poor nutrition as well as infection from other illness.

SYMPTOMS	FLU	COLDS
Fever	Likely (high 102-104°F)	Rare
Headache	Yes	Rare
General aches and pains	Likely and often severe	Sometimes
Fatigue and/or weakness	Yes - up to 2-3 weeks	Mild
Extreme exhaustion	Likely	Never
Stuffy nose	Sometimes	Common
Sneezing	Sometimes	Usual
Sore throat	Sometimes	Common
Chest discomfort/cough	Mild to moderate	Common and can become severe