

# Workplace health: Avoid these myths about the flu

Like it or not, the flu is here. The CDC has already started tracking flu outbreaks for this year's season. As we head further into cold and flu season, keep yourself and your co-workers as healthy as possible by not believing these common winter myths:

**It's all about covering your mouth with your hands.** Hands are the biggest spreaders of infection, so if you do this, wash them immediately or use sanitizer. Your arm is much better for a sneeze guard.

**The flu shot gives you the flu.** Though some people experience some mild flu-like symptoms after getting the shot, it's not the flu they're feeling. The viruses in the shots are dead, or inactivated.

**Starve a fever.** There's no reason to starve either the cold or the flu. You do need plenty of fluids, especially if you have a fever. But poor nutrition while you're sick won't do you any good at all.

**Avoid dairy if you're sick.** Many of us are under the impression that dairy will make our cough worse or increase our stuffiness. Dairy really has nothing to do with phlegm production.

**Loading up on vitamins will ward off illness.** If you're generally taking good care of yourself, which includes getting enough sleep and eating a nutrient-rich diet, your immune system will be better off. But that's about it.

**Being cold will give you a cold.** Temperature has no direct influence on your likelihood of catching something. The reason there are more colds and flus in the winter is because the lower temperature dries out your mucous membranes, which makes it easier for a virus to take hold in your nasal passages.

**The majority of body heat is lost through the head.** It's true that the face, head and chest are more sensitive to temperature changes than the rest of the body, but this unfounded belief probably had its roots in a flawed military experiment from the 1950s.

## Cough cough ... but are you infectious?

We've all been there. Things are piling up on your desk. Your inbox requires attention. You don't feel well, but you need to be at the office.

However, what you don't need is to infect the other members of your team.

So, how can you know if that cold or flu you've been struggling through is still contagious?

In an article for *The New York Times*, Richard Klasco, M.D. writes that the best data we have currently on infectivity of upper respiratory infections still comes from studies in which healthy people volunteer to be infected with viruses, so the number of studies is small. "Those studies show that symptoms are an undependable marker of infectivity. A more reliable guide is the natural course of infection, which can be divided into three phases: incubation, symptomatic/infectious, and recovery."

**Incubation** (infectious without symptoms): lasts about a day for influenza and maybe just a few hours for the common cold. This is the tricky phase, because you can spread infection, but you have no telltale symptoms yet.

**Symptomatic/Infectious:** lasts about five to seven days for the flu and about three days for the common cold after the onset of symptoms, even if they're mild.

**Recovery** (noninfectious with symptoms): begins within about a week. You may still have symptoms like cough or fatigue but are no longer infectious to others.

Incidentally, the flu vaccine can reduce the length and severity of your illness; but if you get sick, you're still contagious.

So, the short rule of thumb for adults (children can be both sick and contagious for a longer period of time) is: Cold = three days. Flu = a week.

But, of course, if in doubt, be cautious and protective of your work environment and stay home for that extra day, if possible.