

Knowing when you should call into work sick with a cold or flu

ABC Life / By Kellie Scott

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IMAGERest is the best thing for curing a cold or flu, our experts say. *(Pexels/ABC Life: Luke Tribe)*

You've just woken up, your throat feels scratchy and your nose is blocked. But you're not exactly on death's door.

Should you go to work?

Blue Mountains GP Miriam Brooks says there are two reasons to avoid work when you have a cold or flu.

"One is to rest and recover, in which case people should be guided by their symptoms — fatigue, fever, feeling unwell," she says.

The other reason to stay home is to avoid making your co-workers sick, which can happen even if you're feeling OK.

But when and for how long you should avoid work depends on a few things.

Is it a cold or the flu?

Both colds and flus can give you sore throat, cough and the sniffles, and leave you feeling tired.

Influenza tends to be more severe, with high fevers, fatigue, muscle pains and headache.

The incubation period (the time between catching the infection and symptoms appearing) will vary depending on the virus.

For influenza, it can range from one to four days, for example.

Source: Dr Miriam Brooks

Why you should stay home and rest

Some of us really struggle to stay home from work when we're sick.

That can be because we don't receive sick pay or don't have much flexibility.

Many of us feel that any time off will mean an increased workload on our return, whereas for others it's a case of not wanting to let the team down.

All of which can make us feel pressured to [work through illness](#), often masking our symptoms with over-the-counter medications in order to carry on.

"There is such a cultural push about soldiering on," Dr Brooks says.

These attitudes create a phenomenon known as "presenteeism" — reduced productivity at work due to health problems — which costs the Australian economy more than [\\$34 billion a year](#).

And it's not just bad for your workplace.

"If people force themselves to work when they are really unwell, they may end being sicker for a lot longer," Dr Brooks says.

"It's just more efficient for everyone to have a proper rest and recover more quickly."

The 'stay home' symptoms

Michael Tam is from the UNSW School of Public Health and Community Medicine. He says if you feel horrible and are not likely to be productive at work, it makes sense to stay home.

"This might be due to the severity of specific symptoms like sore throat or cough, or an overall sense of tiredness and fatigue," he says.

"Secondly, if you are actively having coughing that is difficult to control, or still having vomiting or diarrhoea, it would be worthwhile staying at home to avoid passing on the virus to work

colleagues or members of the public."

YOUTUBE Dr Sandro Demaio answers common questions about vitamins as we head into the cold and flu season.

Given the average adult has several respiratory viral infections a year, some of us may not feel able to stay home for all of them.

But symptoms including fever, chills, fatigue, muscle pain, headache and accompanying cough are ones that really do call for bed rest (or time on the couch with the remote).

"If symptoms are such that they are quite uncomfortable — and that would often be the case by the time someone chooses to see a doctor rather than self-manage — then it would be very reasonable for them to use their sick leave for rest and recovery," Dr Tam says.

If your symptoms are mild and above the neck — for example, a runny nose and sore throat — you might be OK to [do things like exercise](#), but work could still be risky if you have contact with other people, as you may be contagious (more on this below).

If you are tempted to use over-the-counter analgesics and decongestants to improve symptoms, Dr Tam says not to overdo it.

"[Cold and flu medicines] can be helpful, but not usually very much. My usual recommendation is to not overuse them, and it would be very reasonable to not use them at all."



IMAGEIf you work in the food service industry, the risk of spreading viruses is heightened. (*Unsplash: Fabrizio Magoni*)

When am I contagious?

If symptoms are relatively mild and the risk of spreading the infection isn't high, it might be OK for you to go to work, says Dr Tam.

But as it depends on the type of virus and your context, there isn't a simple, definitive answer.

"By the time you 'notice you're sick' — usually at the beginning of the illness with the symptoms getting worse before getting better — you are probably during the most contagious period," warns Dr Tam.

"It is probably fair to say that while you have symptoms due to a flu or cold, you may be contagious, [but may be less so] if symptoms are improving or it's been over a week since symptoms began."

Dr Brooks' advice echoes this. She adds that otherwise-healthy adults can transmit influenza a day before symptoms begin.

For a cold, she says you'll generally be contagious for "a couple of days".

So if you start to show signs of a winter virus, the responsible thing to do is take yourself back home so you don't make others sick.

If you develop a persistent cough that outlasts the general recovery time, then provided you haven't picked up another virus, you aren't likely infectious.

"People can develop post-infectious symptoms — like a persistent cough from irritation and inflammation of the upper airways," Dr Tam says.

Note: not everyone who is infected with the common cold or flu will have symptoms, says Dr Tam, but they can still spread the virus.

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Sick leave entitlements

If you are a full-time employee, you are entitled to take [at least 10 days](#) of personal or carer's leave each year. This includes for sickness.

If you're taking sick leave, you must [let your boss know](#) as soon as you possibly can.

If the employer requests it and that request is reasonable, the employee must provide evidence (like a doctor's certificate) to show the leave was legitimate.

Some workplaces have policies and procedures around notification of sick days, but there's no law or requirement that sets out that you need to do it via phone, text message or any other method.

How long should I have off work?

As a minimum, people should stay away from work two to three days with a cold, and for the first week of influenza, recommends Dr Brooks.

She says if you are sensing your body needs more rest, it's better to stay home. If you aren't sure, see a GP.

The number of days to take off work also depends on the severity of the illness and nature of the workplace, says Dr Tam.

"For instance, for people working in health or involved food preparation and handling, the risk they pose to the public is rather higher," he says.

"Healthcare workers with a diagnosis of influenza, the recommendation is that they are excluded from work until the resolution of their symptoms, as long as it has been at least five days since the beginning of their symptoms."

Avoiding public places where possible is advised, but especially avoid people with lowered immunity such as babies and young children, pregnant women, elderly people and people on immune suppressing medications, says Dr Brooks.

And yes, that means using your sick days to go to the shopping centre is a bad idea.

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VIDEO Ever wondered if it's OK to text in sick? Real-world bosses weigh in on sick leave, watching the clock, and more.

When should you see your doctor or go to hospital?

Children, the elderly and people with health conditions like diabetes or asthma should always be assessed by a medical professional, says Dr Brooks.

For everyone else, "a high fever, headaches and worsening of symptoms" may need medical attention.

If unsure, Dr Brooks says you should never feel bad about just getting checked out.

"Even if a GP tells you it's all good, [and just] a simple viral infection, it's our job to know that, not yours."

Where people feel critically unwell, Dr Tam says they should go to the emergency department for urgent assessment.

"For most people, this should be a rare event."

How the common cold and flu is spread

Through the air in droplets from coughing, sneezing or even breathing.

Also by direct contact — if you touch a contaminated surface and then touch your mouth, eyes or nose.

Other ways to stop the spread

Other than staying away from work and public spaces, there are things you can do to stop the spread of your virus.

Our experts recommend:

Coughing into your arm (the vampire cough) and sneezing into a tissue (and be sure to dispose of it properly)

Washing your hands regularly with soap and water or use alcohol rubs — particularly after travelling on public transport and visiting hospitals or your GP

Wearing a surgical mask.

Our experts gave general advice only. For detailed personal advice, you should see a qualified medical practitioner who knows your medical history.