Respiratory viruses

We have given you this factsheet because you may have a respiratory virus. A respiratory virus is an illness that infects the respiratory (breathing) system. There are a wide variety of different respiratory viruses such as influenza (flu), COVID-19 or the common cold.

Respiratory viruses can affect any age group. The symptoms vary in severity from person to person and can be very mild or quite severe. The most at risk of complications are children, the elderly, and people with weaker immune systems or chronic illnesses.

Respiratory viruses include:
- influenza A and B
- respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)
- parainfluenza viruses
- adenoviruses
- human metapneumovirus
- coronaviruses
- rhinoviruses
- COVID-19

Symptoms

Symptoms can range from mild, cold-like symptoms such as a runny nose, sneezing or blocked nose, to more severe symptoms such as a fever and cough. Symptoms can last for up to five days or longer depending on the virus causing the illness.

Influenza	**COVID-19**	**Other respiratory viruses**
Symptoms typically last for up to five days in adults and seven days in children. Symptoms can make you feel so unwell that you have to stay in bed and rest until you feel better. • Fever (high temperature) • Aching joints or muscles • Shivering or chills • Cough • Tiredness • Sore throat • Sudden onset headache	• A new continuous cough • High temperature or shivering • Loss or alteration in smell or taste • Shortness of breath • Blocked or runny nose • Shivering or chills • Sore throat • Diarrhoea • Feeling tired or exhausted • Sudden onset headache • Aching body, joints, and muscles	(such as parainfluenza, common cold, metapneumovirus and RSV) • Runny nose • Sneezing • Cough • Sore throat • Sometimes fever However, these viruses can also cause ‘influenza-like illness’ which can be similar in symptoms and severity to flu itself.

In some instances, people with existing conditions who contract a respiratory virus may have severe complications which may require a longer stay in hospital or an intensive care unit.

How do respiratory viruses spread?

Respiratory viruses spread easily from one person to another. When someone with a virus coughs or sneezes, the virus can travel in droplets (tiny particles) to other people nearby who breathe in the droplets and may then develop the infection.

They can also spread when people touch surfaces that have been contaminated with the virus and then touch their mouth, nose, or eyes. Viruses can live on surfaces like door knobs and telephones for up to several days.

If you have a respiratory virus, make sure that you:

- cover your nose and mouth if you sneeze or cough (preferably with a tissue)
- put used tissues in a bin
- wash your hands or use alcohol hand gel regularly, and always after coughing, sneezing, or touching contaminated objects or surfaces
- wipe surfaces regularly with disinfectant wipes

Treating respiratory viruses

At home

If you have a respiratory virus at home, you should:

- rest
- drink plenty of fluid
- take pain relief medication such as paracetamol if you need to

If you have a temperature, stay away from school, work, babies, young children, and the elderly. Most people get better without needing any treatment. Seek medical advice if your symptoms become more severe or last for more than a week.

If you are pregnant or have a chronic or long-standing illness and you develop symptoms of a respiratory virus, contact your general practitioner (GP) or midwife for advice.

In hospital

In some cases, we may need to treat your respiratory virus in hospital. This may be because your symptoms become more severe or lead to further illness, or because you develop the symptoms while you are being treated in hospital for another condition.

In hospital we will take a nasal (nose) swab or a throat sample to test for respiratory viruses. If you have flu or COVID-19, we may give you a bed in a single room or put you in a bay with other patients with the same respiratory virus so that the virus does not spread to other patients, staff, and visitors.

The healthcare team may wear masks, gloves and aprons when caring for you. If you need to leave your side room (for example, to go for an x-ray), we may ask you to wear a mask while you are outside the room.

Your doctor may prescribe medication for you to treat the respiratory virus.

The best way to protect yourself against flu is to have the flu vaccination each winter. If you are at high risk of infection, make sure you have your vaccination every year.

The hospital provides flu vaccinations for staff each winter to reduce the risk of flu spreading.

Useful links
www.nhs.uk/live-well/seasonal-health/keep-warm-keep-well

If you are a patient at one of our hospitals and need this document translated, or in another format such as easy read, large print, Braille or audio, please telephone **0800 484 0135** or email **PFSH@uhs.nhs.uk**

For help preparing for your visit, arranging an interpreter or accessing the hospital, please visit **www.uhs.nhs.uk/additionalsupport**

Join our family of charity supporters with a monthly donation! It's a wonderful way to show your ongoing support of our patients and staff.
Scan the QR code or visit southamptonhospitalscharity.org/donate

Southampton Hospitals Charity
Charity Registration Numbers 1051543

Version 3. Published October 2026. Due for review October 2029. 1786