A tool kit against acute respiratory infections – How can we protect ourselves from diseases such as COVID-19 and influenza?

Viruses that can easily spread from infectious persons to the mucous membranes of others when exhaling, speaking or singing lead to many millions of cases of respiratory disease every year. The spread of respiratory diseases is dependent on the season. Every year in autumn and winter, respiratory viruses (SARS-CoV-2, influenza viruses and other common cold viruses) spread more easily among the population. People spend more of their time indoors, warm air from the heating system dries out the mucous membranes of their respiratory tract and their immune system is probably not in as good a shape as in the summer. Most infections are mild, but above all SARS-CoV-2 and influenza viruses are also able to cause serious disease progressions and even death. An increased risk of severe progressions exists especially among older people, as their immune system is no longer as active and unable to react as flexibly as a younger person’s, especially when faced with new pathogens.

There are effective ways of preventing the spread of infection and consequently a large number of cases of illness. Everyone can protect themselves, their family, friends and colleagues through responsible behaviour.

1 Stay at home if you have symptoms

Persons with cold symptoms* should stay at home, avoid contact with others and wait until symptoms improve significantly (3–5 days) – even if your COVID-19 test is negative.

Employers should encourage their employees to stay at home if they have symptoms or are ill. This reduces the probability that others will become infected and facilitates a rapid recovery.

* Symptoms include: a runny nose, sore throat, headache and aching limbs, coughing, an increase in temperature or fever, shortness of breath and general fatigue. Caution: Although people who have been vaccinated or have recovered often only show very mild symptoms, they might still be infected and can infect others!

2 Get treatment for infections and know where to find help

In case of infection, disease progression should be monitored closely. If symptoms worsen, inform your doctor’s surgery. Should it be closed, call the out-of-hours patient care services (Tel.: 116 117).

Persons at an increased risk of severe disease should always consult their physician as quickly as possible on the use of antiviral medicines (both for COVID-19 and for influenza).
**Air frequently and “sensibly”**

The risk of infection is minimised if rooms shared with others are **regularly impact ventilated** (e.g. every half hour). This applies to all indoor spaces (for example in waiting rooms, the workplace or at private get-togethers at home).

**Rule of thumb:** The more people present, the more often rooms should be aired. The most effective method is **cross ventilation** (opposite windows are opened simultaneously).

**Caution:** Permanently tilted windows have little effect as the volume of air exchanged is not especially large.

*Find additional information on airing here:*

**When indoors: Wear a face mask**

Wearing a face mask is a simple and well-tested means of protecting yourself and others from infection, especially when:

... you have contact with people from risk groups, or if you belong to a risk group yourself,
... many people are together in the same room,
... you are in the room for a prolonged period of time,
... it is not possible to air sufficiently,
... it is not possible to socially distance (e.g cinemas, concerts, public transport, such as trains and buses, or break rooms at the workplace).

This applies to both COVID-19 and influenza, regardless of vaccination status.

**What is important is that everyone participates!**

**HOW DO I WEAR MY MASK PROPERLY?**

1. **Cover your mouth and nose completely.**
2. **Make sure that the mask sits tightly without gaps and press the nose wire firmly.**
Be considerate of those around you

Older persons and people with specific pre-existing conditions (e.g. diabetes, obesity, disorders of the immune system) have a higher risk of severe illness progression when they contract a respiratory disease. In the event of an acute respiratory infection, the best way to protect those around you is to avoid personal contact until you recover.

In addition to the behavioural tips above, you can also protect those around you by helping to set up vaccination appointments or by assisting with getting to doctor’s appointments.

What is important, both for COVID-19 and for influenza alike:
**Wait until your symptoms have subsided so as to avoid infecting others!**
In the case of COVID-19, an antigen test might additionally be useful to verify whether the infection has indeed subsided.

The following protects against serious illness

The best measure to protect against serious disease progressions is the **vaccine** (available e.g. from your doctor). This applies to both COVID-19 and influenza. Even if you have already recovered from COVID-19, the Standing Committee on Vaccination (STIKO) advises that you get the vaccine.

- **With the aid of the Impf-Guide to your personal COVID-19 vaccination recommendation, you can check whether a further COVID-19 vaccination is recommended:**
  https://www.zusammengegencorona.de/impfen/

- **General information on COVID-19 vaccination:**
  https://www.rki.de/covid-19-faq-impfen

- **General information on influenza vaccination:**
  https://www.rki.de/faq-influenza-impfung