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Managing Colds and Flu risks in the workplace

Each year, respiratory illnesses like the common cold and influenza disrupt productivity in workplaces, spreading quickly through shared environments such as open-plan offices, shared workplaces and learning environments. While these illnesses may seem routine, their impact on individual well-being, attendance, and overall operational efficiency is far from minor. Understanding how these viruses spread—and more importantly, how to prevent them—is essential for maintaining a healthy, high-functioning environment. This article explores the key differences between the flu and the common cold, and outlines practical, evidence-based strategies to reduce transmission risks in communal spaces.

Although the flu and the common cold share many symptoms, they are caused by different viruses and vary in severity, duration, and potential complications. Understanding the differences can help in early recognition, appropriate treatment, and effective prevention.

1. Cause

- **Influenza (Flu):**
Caused by influenza viruses (mainly types A and B). These viruses change frequently, leading to seasonal flu outbreaks.
- **Common Cold:**
Caused by a variety of viruses, most commonly *rhinoviruses*, but also *coronaviruses*, *adenoviruses*, and others.

2. Incubation Time

- **Flu:**
1 to 4 days (average of 2 days) from exposure to the onset of symptoms.
- **Common Cold:**
1 to 3 days after exposure to the virus.

3. Duration of Illness

- **Flu:**
Symptoms can last 5 to 7 days, but fatigue and cough may persist for two weeks or more.
- **Common Cold:**
Usually resolves in 7 to 10 days, though some symptoms (like a cough) may linger slightly longer.

4. Signs and Symptoms

Symptom	Influenza (Flu)	Common cold
Onset	Sudden	Gradual
Fever	Common, high (38°C to 40°C)	Rare or mild
Headache	Common	Rare
Fatigue	Severe, can last weeks	Mild
Body Aches	Common and severe	Mild
Chills	Common	Rare
Runny/Stuffy Nose	Sometimes	Very common
Sneezing	Sometimes	Common
Cough	Common, can be severe	Mild to moderate
Sore Throat	Sometimes	Common
Chest Discomfort	Common	Mild

5. Treatment

- Flu:
 - Antiviral medications (e.g., oseltamivir) may be prescribed if taken within the first 48 hours.
 - Rest, fluids, and fever reducers like paracetamol or ibuprofen.
 - Severe cases may require hospitalization.
- Common Cold:
 - No cure – treatment focuses on symptom relief.
 - Includes decongestants, cough syrups, pain relievers, and throat lozenges.
 - Antibiotics are not effective unless a bacterial infection develops.

6. Prevention

- Flu:
 - Annual influenza vaccination is the most effective prevention.
 - Hand hygiene and avoiding close contact with infected individuals.
 - Mask-wearing in high-risk seasons or areas.
- Common Cold:
 - No vaccine available.
 - Good hand hygiene, avoiding touching the face, and disinfecting commonly used surfaces.
 - Maintain a healthy immune system through nutrition, sleep, and exercise.

7. Possible Complications

- Flu:
 - Can lead to serious complications, especially in high-risk groups (elderly, young children, pregnant women, and people with chronic illnesses).
 - Includes pneumonia, bronchitis, sinus infections, ear infections, and exacerbation of chronic conditions like asthma or heart disease.
 - In extreme cases, flu can be fatal.
- Common Cold:
 - Complications are rare and usually mild.
 - May include sinus congestion, middle ear infections, or worsening of asthma.

8. Transmission Risk

- Flu:
 - Highly contagious, especially in the first 3-4 days of illness.
 - Spread through droplets from coughing, sneezing, or talking.
 - Can also spread by touching contaminated surfaces and then touching the face.

- Common Cold:
 - Also contagious, but less so than the flu.
 - Spread similarly through airborne droplets and contaminated surfaces.
 - Children tend to be more susceptible and can spread it easily in schools and homes.

Reducing the risk of colds and flu in open-plan offices, shared workplaces and learning environments

Open-plan offices and learning environments are high-risk environments for the spread of colds and flu due to close contact among individuals and shared airspace. Reducing this risk requires a multi-faceted approach focused on air quality, hygiene practices, and preventative health measures.

One of the most effective ways to minimize airborne transmission is through **adequate cross ventilation**. This occurs when fresh air enters a room through one side (such as a window or door) and exits through another, creating a continuous flow that replaces stale air. Cross ventilation helps dilute airborne viruses, reducing the concentration of infectious particles, and improves indoor air quality by preventing air from becoming stagnant. To achieve this, windows and doors on opposite sides of a room should be opened whenever possible, and furniture should be arranged in a way that does not obstruct airflow. The use of window fans or ventilators can further enhance this effect.

Air conditioners (AC), particularly those set to high temperatures during colder months, can unintentionally contribute to the spread of illness. Warm, dry indoor environments can dry out the mucous membranes in the nose and throat, making individuals more susceptible to infections. Moreover, air conditioning systems that recirculate air without adequate filtration can spread viruses from one person to another, especially in large, shared spaces. To mitigate these risks, air conditioners should be set to moderate, comfortable temperatures—typically between 22–24°C—and be equipped with high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters or ultraviolet (UV) purification systems. Regular maintenance and cleaning of AC units are essential to prevent microbial buildup and ensure safe operation.

Promoting **good hygiene practices** is another critical element. Encouraging frequent handwashing or the use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers helps prevent the transfer of viruses via contaminated surfaces. Placing hand sanitizing stations at entrances, learning environments, and common work areas reinforces this habit. In addition, promoting respiratory hygiene—such as coughing or sneezing into a tissue or elbow, disposing of tissues immediately, and avoiding face-touching—can significantly reduce the spread of infectious droplets.

Employers and educators should also encourage individuals who are feeling unwell to **stay at home** to prevent exposing others. Implementing flexible policies, such as work-from-home or remote learning options during flu season, can help maintain productivity while protecting public health. Additionally, regularly disinfecting shared surfaces such as desks, doorknobs, phones, and keyboards with appropriate antiviral cleaning products is essential to minimize surface transmission.

In shared environments, it's also beneficial to **limit clustering** of individuals and maintain reasonable physical distance wherever possible. This can be achieved by rearranging seating plans, using partitions or signage to guide movement, and staggering break times to reduce crowding in common areas.

Vaccination remains one of the most effective tools in preventing the spread of influenza. Encouraging annual flu vaccination among staff and students, and organizing on-site vaccination campaigns where possible, can significantly reduce infection rates during flu season.

Lastly, in spaces where natural ventilation is limited, the use of **portable air purifiers** with HEPA filters can provide an additional layer of protection. These devices can remove airborne particles, including some viruses, and are especially useful in older buildings or during extreme weather when windows may remain closed.

Reducing the spread of colds and flu in open-plan offices and learning environments requires a proactive, multi-layered approach that includes proper ventilation, air quality control, hygiene practices, and supportive health policies. Measures such as ensuring effective cross ventilation, maintaining moderate indoor temperatures, and encouraging good hygiene and distancing habits play a key role in protecting the health of individuals in shared environments. At the same time, understanding the differences between the flu and the common cold—in terms of

severity, symptoms, treatment, and potential complications—is essential for early recognition, effective management, and the protection of vulnerable populations.

A healthy team is a productive team — stop the spread, stay home when sick, and protect your workplace from colds and flu.

Should you require further assistance of advice feel free to email us on info@topcompliance.co.za

Yours in Health and Safety

				
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Appointments, checklists and templates	First aid equipment	Signage	Legal posters	Safety Equipment

Courses offered by Top Compliance (Pty) Ltd

ONLINE ACADEMY - https://academy.topcompliance.co.za/		
Occupational Health and Safety Courses	Online	Onsite Excluding travel
Safety representative – Legal Liability	R980.00	R1300.00
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability	R1250.00	R 1730.00
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment	R735.00	R875.00
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638	R735.00	R875.00
Basic Ladder Safety Course	R735.00	R810.00
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses		
Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting	R735.00	R875.00
Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning	R810.00	R950.00

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ONSITE TRAINING	
First Aid Courses:	
Level 1 - US 119567 - Perform basic life support and first aid procedures	2 days
Level 2 - US 120496 - Provide risk-based primary emergency care/first aid in the workplace	3 days
Level 3 - US 376480 - Provide first aid as an advanced first responder	3 days
Level 1 & 2 - US 119567 & 120496	3 days
Level 1, 2 & 3 - US 119567, 120496 & 376480	5 days
Level 2 & 3 - US 120496 & 376480	3 days
Child and infant CPR & choking	6 hours
Adult CPR & choking	6 hours
Adult CPR & choking and AED	1 day
Occupational Health and Safety Courses	
Safety representative – Legal Liability	1 day
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability	1 day
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment	1 day
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638	6 hours
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Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses	
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