For many, colds and flu are an unfortunate part of winter, but taking a few basic precautions can greatly reduce your risk for becoming infected or spreading these winter illnesses.

More than a hundred different viruses can cause colds. Most people average three colds a year. Symptoms, which usually last up to two weeks, may include a sore throat, sneezing, congestion, coughing, aches and pains, watery eyes, fever.

Influenza is a contagious respiratory infection, but isn't usually a threat to most people. Symptoms are similar to a cold, but are often more severe and last longer. It is very contagious, spreading amongst individuals without much effort. Most people infected with the flu will not die from it, although they can get very sick. For the elderly, those that have a chronic health problem and young children, it can cause serious complications.

The advice hasn't really changed much over the years: strict hand washing, limiting contact with sick individuals and immunization against influenza (flu shot).

Although the vaccine is not perfect, it almost certainly decreases the severity of influenza if you contract it and often times limits this severe illness to a mild cold over a few days. Regular hand washing with either soap and water or an alcohol based waterless soap will often decrease the spread as well. You cannot get the flu from the flu shot.

Certain medications can treat confirmed cases of influenza, often helping to shorten both the course and severity of the illness. One medication has actually been shown to be successful in treating avian flu (bird flu), an illness that has been spread to some humans. While it is extremely rare at this time for avian flu to spread from person to person, many people have tried to acquire medication to take just in case they get infected. This is very dangerous and inappropriate given most cases of suspected flu are not actually flu. The rapidly evolving number of strains of avian flu have also become resistant to this particular medication.

Although everyone should get a flu shot to prevent spread and severity of the disease, certain people are considered higher risk than others: women who are pregnant, close household contacts with children less than 6 months of age, children 6 months to 3 years of age, those with heart, lung or other chronic illnesses and adults over the age of 65.

Call your doctor and inquire about getting a flu shot. Don’t let this opportunity fly away!