

# Common Cold

Family Health Center  
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## What is it?

The "common cold" is a viral infection involving the nose, throat, mouth, ears and sinuses, all of which are considered part of the upper respiratory system, thus the medical term *viral upper respiratory infection*.

## What causes it?

Colds are almost always caused by viruses. There are more than 100 different kinds of cold viruses, including the *rhinovirus* (nose virus, causing 80% of colds), *adenovirus*, *echovirus*, *respiratory syncytial virus*, *parainfluenza virus*, and others. *Influenza virus* (flu virus) is a specific type of virus which can cause epidemics of serious illness even though it is far less common than other viruses. The "flu shot" protects against 3 different strains of influenza. However, the shot does not prevent infection from any other virus.

The main way viruses get into the body is by a person touching their own nose or eyes following contact with infected mucous. Rhinoviruses can survive on the hands or on surfaces for several hours and have been detected on the hands of up to 90% of cold sufferers. Other ways of spreading viruses include small particle mucous that linger in the air after an infected person sneezes and large particle mucous spread by cough.

## Who gets it?

Each year about one hundred million Americans come down with a cold. This includes almost half of everyone that you know. The average healthy child has between six and nine viral infections each year. The child's immune system is being made stronger with each cold, so even the sniffles have a positive side.

Risk factors for the common cold include smoking, poor nutrition, crowding, stress, sedentary lifestyle and day care attendance for young children.

Some of the colds may be very short and mild, while others may last a week or longer. Individuals who often get colds seldom have anything seriously wrong with them. Those people who have real problems with their immune system most often have very serious illnesses, rather than frequent mild illnesses.

## What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of the common cold occur within 10-12 hours after infection and often include a sore throat, low grade fever (esp. children), runny nose, mild headache, poor appetite, sneezing, coughing, malaise and fatigue. Ear discomfort can be caused by plugging of the *eustachian tube* leading between the middle ear space and the back of the throat, even if there is no ear infection. Hoarseness occurs when vocal chords are irritated. It is also possible to have muscle aches and joint aches. Cold symptoms generally last about 7 to 10 days but can persist for up to 3 weeks.

## How do you prevent it?

Because the virus particles are highly contagious, it is very difficult to prevent spreading, particularly amongst family members. Eating a balanced diet, getting enough sleep, managing stress, and exercising moderately help the immune system to fend off viruses. Decreasing or stopping smoking and avoiding second hand smoke whenever possible is also helpful.

However, the best thing you can do is to **wash your hands** regularly, particularly when you've had contact with the infected individual. The secretions from the eye, nose and mouth, when transferred on the hands to another person, are usually the source of infection. Regularly disinfecting surfaces like countertops, phone receivers, and doorknobs will also help to limit cold viruses from spreading.

### Warning signs

- Fever over 101F for children and prolonged fever, more than 3 days, in adults.
- Severe and persistent cough.
- Nasal discharge, which is yellow, green or creamy and lasts all day for 7-10 days.
- Difficulty breathing.
- Sudden pain or discharge from the ear.
- Cough productive of yellow, green, brown or bloody sputum or phlegm.
- Symptoms which last more than two weeks.
- A severe headache combined with a stiff neck.

## Can it be treated?

Unfortunately, there is still no cure for the common cold. Antibiotics are not helpful since they have no effect on viruses. Hundreds of viral and bacterial germs can cause what seems like the same illness. Even if you do have a similar illness you had before, for which you received an antibiotic, that doesn't mean that the antibiotic helped, even if you got better while taking it. Sometimes an antibiotic gets the credit when your body's defenses do the work.

The best treatment for a viral illness may simply be home remedies and over-the-counter cold treatments. Given time, the body's own immune system will destroy the viral particles and eliminate the infection. This may take a few days or as long as two to three weeks.

- **Rest** is needed, but most people do a good job of pacing themselves, based on how they feel. There is no reason for a person to be kept in bed if he/she feels well enough to be up and about. In fact, moderate exercise may boost immune function. If a child feels well enough to go to school, he or she should be allowed to do so. Colds are most contagious a day or two before symptoms appear, so keeping a child home until all symptoms are gone is pointless.

- **Drink plenty of fluids** like water, juices, Kool-aid, popsicles, herbal teas and soups. If you or the child does not want to eat much solid food, don't worry about it. Your appetite will return when you feel better.

- **Stop smoking** and avoid smoky rooms since cigarette smoke paralyzes the body's own immune system which normally fights infection.

- **Throat remedies** like gargling with warm salt water offers some symptomatic relief pain in adults and children old enough to cooperate (see recipe below). Do not swallow this mixture, as it can make you vomit. You may gargle every 4 hours but make a fresh solution each time. Hard candy (butterscotch seems to be a soothing flavor) can also be used in children over four years of age, or in adults as often as necessary. You can avoid expensive throat sprays or lozenges since they are no more effective than hard candy.

- **Salt water nasal spray** can be used to relieve nasal congestion and plugged ears. You may use the recipe and instructions below or purchase the solution without a prescription (Ocean or NaSal).

- **Acetaminophen** (Tylenol) can be given every 4-6 hours or **Ibuprofen** (Advil, Motrin) every 6-8 hours to help control fever and relieve muscle aches and pains. Children should avoid the use of Aspirin since there have been rare cases of Reye's Syndrome associated with its use during a viral infection.

- **Decongestants** such as pseudoephedrine (Sudafed) can be used as needed to clear up the nasal

congestion and stuffy head. However, they should not be used by children under age 5 or by people with high blood pressure. Antihistamines, which dry secretions making them thicker and stickier and more difficult for the body to remove, probably should be avoided, unless allergies are involved.

- **Cough preparations**, such as the cough mixture below, or cough suppressants with dextromethorphan can be used as needed, especially for a dry, hacky cough or at night to enable sleep.

### Home remedies

- **Salt Water Gargle:** Mix 1 teaspoon salt per cup of warm water and gargle as needed.

- **Salt Water Nasal Spray:** Boil 1 cup of water, then cool to room temperature. Add 1/4 teaspoon of table salt. Put solution in dropper or spray bottle (or refill your ocean spray bottle, purchased at the drug store). Use 2-3 drops or 1 spray 4 times per day. Blow nose gently after applying, or bulb suction the nose of an infant or young child. Finish one nostril before proceeding on to the other side. Make a new solution after seven days.

- **Cough Mixture:** Mix 1 part lemon juice and 2 parts honey. Take 1 tablespoon every 2-3 hours.

## Are there complications?

Colds almost never produce any serious medical problems, but a very small percentage of individuals eventually develop complications. In infants, this most likely will show up as an ear infection or nasal infection. Other infections, such as *sinusitis*, *bronchitis* or even *pneumonia* are possible but unusual complications.

Since people with a cold generally have a poor appetite, they often do not drink enough fluids. This can result in *dehydration*, which makes the "run down" feeling even worse.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the common cold can make other medical problems, such as asthma or emphysema worse and in some individuals, requiring hospitalization.

### In summary

- The common cold is caused by viruses.
- The only way to cure a cold is to help your body heal itself with fluids, rest and not smoking.
- Antibiotics (which are used for bacterial infections) will not treat the viruses which cause the common cold and can cause side effects.

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