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## Colds

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### Condition Basics

#### What are colds?

Colds are the most common infection of the nose, sinuses, or throat (upper respiratory infection). Colds are caused by viruses. They're spread by coughs, sneezes, and close contact. You can catch a cold at any time of year, but they're more common in late winter and early spring. There's no cure for colds.

#### What are the symptoms?

Lots of different viruses cause colds, but the symptoms are usually the same. They include:

- Runny nose and sneezing.
- Red eyes.
- Sore throat and cough.
- Headaches and body aches.

You will probably feel a cold come on over the course of a couple of days. As the cold gets worse, your nose may get stuffy with thicker mucus.

A cold isn't the same as [influenza \(flu\)](#). Flu symptoms are worse and come on faster. If you have the flu, you may feel very tired. You may also have a fever and shaking chills, lots of aches and pains, a headache, and a cough.

If you feel like you have a cold all the time, or if cold symptoms last more than 2 weeks, you may have allergies or sinusitis.

#### How can you care for yourself at home?

- To prevent dehydration, drink plenty of fluids. Choose water and other clear liquids until you feel better. If you have kidney, heart, or liver disease and have to limit fluids, talk with your doctor before you increase the amount of fluids you drink.
- Ask your doctor if you can take an over-the-counter pain medicine, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin), or naproxen (Aleve). Be safe with

### COVID-19 Self-Assessment

Use the [BC COVID-19 Self-Assessment Tool](#) to answer some questions about your symptoms to find out if a COVID-19 test is recommended. You can complete it for yourself or someone else.

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medicines. Read and follow all instructions on the label. No one younger than 18 should take aspirin. It has been linked to Reye syndrome, a serious illness.

- Be careful when taking over-the-counter cold or influenza (flu) medicines and Tylenol at the same time. Many of these medicines have acetaminophen, which is Tylenol. Read the labels to make sure that you are not taking more than the recommended dose. Too much acetaminophen (Tylenol) can be harmful.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Use saline (saltwater) nasal washes to help keep your nasal passages open and wash out mucus and allergens. You can buy saline nose sprays at a grocery store or drugstore. Follow the instructions on the package. Or you can make your own at home. Add 1 teaspoon (5 mL) of non-iodized salt and 1 teaspoon (5 mL) of baking soda to 2 cups (500 mL) of distilled or boiled and cooled water. Fill a squeeze bottle or neti pot with the nasal wash. Then put the tip into your nostril, and lean over the sink. With your mouth open, gently squirt the liquid. Repeat on the other side.
- Use a vaporizer or humidifier to add moisture to your bedroom. Follow the instructions for cleaning the machine.
- Do not smoke or allow others to smoke around you. If you need help quitting, talk to your doctor about stop-smoking programs and medicines. These can increase your chances of quitting for good.

**How can you prevent colds?**

There are several things you can do to help prevent colds and other upper respiratory infections (URIs):

- Wash your hands often.
- Be extra careful in winter and when you're around people with colds.
- Keep your hands away from your face. Your nose, eyes, and mouth are the most likely places for germs to enter your body.
- Eat well, and get plenty of sleep and exercise. This keeps your body strong so it can fight URIs.
- Don't smoke. Smoking makes it easier to get a URI and harder to get rid of one.

**When should I call for help?**

Call [9-1-1](#) anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- You have severe trouble breathing.

**Call your doctor or nurse advice line now** or seek immediate medical care if:

- You seem to be getting much sicker.
- You have new or worse trouble breathing.

- You have a new or higher fever.
- You have a new rash.

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor or nurse advice line if:

- You have a new symptom, such as a sore throat, an earache, or sinus pain.
- You cough more deeply or more often, especially if you notice more mucus or a change in the colour of your mucus.
- You do not get better as expected.

Related Information

- [Comforting a Child Who Has a Respiratory Illness](#)
- [Coughs, Age 11 and Younger](#)
- [Coughs, Age 12 and Older](#)
- [Difference Between Influenza \(Flu\) and a Cold](#)
- [Handwashing](#)
- [Influenza \(Seasonal Flu\)](#)
- [Protecting Your Child From Infections](#)
- [Respiratory Problems, Age 11 and Younger](#)
- [Respiratory Problems, Age 12 and Older](#)
- [Sore Throat and Other Throat Problems](#)

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IS IT AN EMERGENCY?

If you or someone in your care has chest pains, difficulty breathing, or severe bleeding, it could be a **life-threatening emergency**. Call 9-1-1 or the local emergency number immediately.

If you are concerned about a possible poisoning or exposure to a toxic substance, call **Poison Control** now at **1-800-567-8911**.

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