

The Common Cold



Rhinovirus Infection

Everyone has experienced the misery of the common cold. A cold causes familiar symptoms such as a runny nose, sore throat, congestion, postnasal drip, and cough. For most sufferers, these symptoms are annoying, but not serious. Cold symptoms gradually improve and disappear over 7 to 10 days without complications.

Colds are viral infections, so treatment with an antibiotic is not helpful. The best treatment for a cold is rest, fluids, and nonprescription medicines to help relieve symptoms. Although there is no vaccine to prevent colds, the spread of cold viruses can be slowed by frequent hand washing and avoiding close contact with those suffering from a cold.

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Antibiotics Should Not Be Used to Treat a Cold

Colds are caused by a variety of viruses, most commonly *rhinoviruses*. These viruses are highly contagious, and they are spread through the air or when someone is in contact with an infected person or contaminated object. There is no good evidence that exposure to cold or being overheated increases the risk of contracting a cold. Although most colds occur in the winter months, some viruses that cause colds are more common in the fall or spring.

Infants and young children are more prone to colds, as are people with weakened immunity. Children may have between six and 10 colds each year; adults average about two to four colds annually.



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Wash your hands thoroughly and frequently to prevent the spread of cold viruses.

Is It a Cold, the Flu, or Allergies?

Symptoms of a cold usually begin with a runny nose and a scratchy, sore throat. Within a day or two, nasal congestion, watery eyes, sneezing, headache, mild fever, and body aches can follow. Many of these symptoms are similar to allergy symptoms. Symptoms of a cold can even appear as a milder version of the respiratory flu. As the cold develops, the differences become apparent. Allergies do not normally cause fever, chills, or body aches. The flu virus causes more severe symptoms than those of the common cold. People suffering from the flu are more likely to have a higher fever, chills, headache, body aches, and fatigue; sore throat and nasal congestion are less common.

Relieving Cold Symptoms

It is always best to stay home, rest, and drink plenty of fluids when fighting a cold. There is no cure for a cold, so treatment is aimed at relieving symptoms. Antibiotics are not helpful to treat a cold because it is caused by a virus, not bacteria. Combination nonprescription cold preparations often contain decongestants, pain and fever reducers, cough suppressants, cough expectorants, sleep aids, or all of these ingredients. For the best results, single-ingredient nonprescription products designed to relieve individual symptoms are most effective and will avoid overlap or underdosing ingredients. For nasal and sinus congestion, an oral or nasal decongestant or nasal saline sprays are effective. Inhaling warm or cold steam may or may not improve symptoms. For headache, fever, and body aches, acetaminophen or a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) like ibuprofen is the best choice. For cough, nonprescription cough medicines can help break up mucus, stop a nighttime cough that prevents sleep, or both. There are several nonprescription cold medicines that should be avoided in children. A healthcare professional should be consulted before cold medications are used in children.

Most people recover completely after a cold. Complications are more likely to develop in the very young or very old or in people with asthma, chronic diseases, or poor immune defenses. The most common complications are asthma flare-ups, sinus infections, and middle ear infections. Less common but possible complications include bronchitis and pneumonia. When the complications of a cold are caused by a bacterial infection, antibiotic therapy is appropriate in addition to symptom-relieving medications.

Prevention

There is no vaccine to prevent colds, so prevention is limited to stopping the spread of the virus. Frequent hand washing for 20 seconds is best, but hand sanitizers are also helpful. Cold viruses are spread through the air, so sneezes and coughs should be covered with a tissue, which is then thrown away. If you do not have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your upper arm or elbow, not your hands. Viral spread also occurs when a person touches infected surfaces such as doorknobs and toys, then touches the face, eyes, or mouth. Any surfaces potentially infected with rhinoviruses should be disinfected to avoid spread of the common cold.