

Colds explained

Colds, or upper respiratory tract infections, are the most common cause of illness in children and adults. Most colds are caused by a virus. There are over 200 types of viruses that can cause the common cold, which is why it's not possible to be immunised against a cold.

Colds are more common in the winter months. Cold weather by itself does not increase the chance of getting a cold. People are in closer contact with each other at this time of year, because they stay indoors, and so are more likely to infect each other. The viruses that cause colds are spread by sneezing, coughing and hand contact.

Symptoms of colds

The symptoms of a cold include various combinations of:

- A stuffy or runny nose
- Sneezing
- Sore throat
- Cough
- Headache
- Red eyes
- Swelling of lymph glands
- Fever (occasionally)
- There may be loss of appetite and, sometimes, nausea and some vomiting.

The actual symptoms will vary from person to person and from illness to illness. Usually, the symptoms will last from a few days to a week or more and the person recovers fully without any ongoing problems.

There is no cure but symptoms can be relieved

There is no cure for the common cold. There is no specific treatment that will make the cold go away more quickly.

Symptoms can be relieved in a number of ways:

- Paracetamol can be given in appropriate doses if fever is present.
- Warm drinks will ease a sore throat and dry mouth.
- Nasal drops or spray will ease a blocked nose.
- Lozenges – the cheapest ones from the milk bar are equally as good as the expensive ones from the chemist.

Children with a cold don't need bed rest

There is no need for bed rest if your child has a cold – let the child decide how much activity they want to take part in. Although children are unlikely to be hungry, make sure they drink lots of fluids. Appetite will return as the child starts to feel better.

Don't use medications

These treatments are **not** necessary and should be avoided:

- **Antibiotics** – colds are caused by a virus and antibiotics will not help, even though they are often prescribed.
- **Cough medicines** – these are of no benefit. The cough is caused by irritation of the trachea (windpipe) or excess mucus, and cough medicine does not affect either of these symptoms.
- **Cold remedies and tablets** – preparations that can be bought over the counter at the chemist are usually not helpful and should be avoided.
- **Aspirin** – do **not** give children aspirin as it may lead to a serious acute illness called Reye's syndrome.

When to see the doctor

Virtually all upper respiratory tract infections get better without any specific treatment. See the doctor if the child or adult:

- Refuses to drink fluids
- Vomits frequently
- Complains of intense headache
- Is pale and sleepy
- Has difficulty breathing
- Has a high fever that does not respond to paracetamol
- Shows no improvement in 48 hours
- Shows any other signs that you are worried about.

Prevention

It is virtually impossible to avoid getting upper respiratory infections. There is no value in giving vitamins in the mistaken belief that this will increase resistance.

For the vast majority of children, flu injections are not necessary, but may be helpful for elderly people.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Pharmacist

Things to remember

- There is no cure for the common cold but symptoms can be relieved.
- Most people recover in about a week.
- Don't use medications like antibiotics or cough mixtures.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Royal Children's Hospital - Centre for Community Child Health

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