

Causes | Symptoms | Treatment options | Lifestyle & diet | Medicines | Support & resources

Common Cold

Overview

The common cold is often mistaken for the flu, but the two are distinctly different. Both can cause coughing, fever, sneezing, sore throat, a blocked or runny nose and general congestion, but a cold shouldn't cause aches and pains or chills.

Colds are caused by viruses, so antibiotics are not usually prescribed. Fortunately, most symptoms can be treated with simple remedies at home.

The average person will have up to 5 colds per year.

Causes

With more than 200 viruses causing colds it is easy to see why it is called common.

Cold viruses are generally highly contagious and are spread through the air when someone coughs or sneezes; through direct contact with another infected person; or by contact with an object such as a tissue or handkerchief that has been used by someone with a cold.

The virus enters the body through the nose, mouth or even the eyes, before settling in the upper respiratory system.

Other factors that contribute to the risk of developing a common cold include:

- ▶ Seasonal factors. The common cold is more common in the winter months when people spend more time indoors.
- ▶ Close contact with infected individuals. Workplaces, nursing homes, boarding houses, retirement villages and places where there are a lot of people in close quarters are ideal places for spreading viruses.
- ▶ Smoking and exposure to cigarette smoke. This lowers resistance and will exacerbate cold symptoms.
- ▶ Having an immature or compromised immune system. This can include adults and children with cancer and premature or low birthweight babies.
- ▶ Chronic illness including asthma, diabetes and autoimmune diseases.

Symptoms

It takes between 24 and 72 hours to incubate a cold, and the first signs are usually:

- ▶ Nasal irritation, including blocked or runny nose with a discharge that may be clear to yellow or greenish.

- ▶ A sore throat.
- ▶ A mild fever.
- ▶ A feeling of being generally unwell.
- ▶ Sneezing.
- ▶ Sinus pain.
- ▶ Headache.
- ▶ Irritability.
- ▶ Loss of appetite.
- ▶ Earache.

Change in the voice, such as huskiness.
Swollen glands in the neck or armpits.

These symptoms will vary in severity, and you might have all of them or just a few. It is usually not necessary to go to the doctor, as a cold will resolve itself with rest, plenty of fluids, and simple treatments such as paracetamol to ease a sore throat and lower fever.

Colds rarely cause complications in healthy people. Occasionally, additional problems such as pneumonia do develop, usually in people with some chronic illnesses such as emphysema.

Diagnosis

The doctor will ask about symptoms and examine your ears, throat, glands and chest. It is rarely necessary to do any tests.

Treatment

Rest and plenty of fluids are important in aiding recovery from a cold. There is no cure, but there are a myriad of over-the-counter products that will help deal with the symptoms.

It is important to remember that a viral infection will not be helped with antibiotics. In fact, using antibiotics when they are not needed can be counter-productive, as bacteria can become resistant to that medication and it will not work when you need it.

Treatment that may be helpful include:

Paracetamol, aspirin or ibuprofen for reducing fever and managing pain from a sore throat, headache, and earache. Use caution with aspirin or ibuprofen if you have asthma or stomach conditions such as an ulcer and never give aspirin to someone under 16 years of age.

Saline nasal sprays and steam inhalation and/or decongestant sprays for reducing nasal congestion.

Ensuring you maintain a high fluid intake, ideally water. This will avoid dehydration.

Getting plenty of rest.

Avoiding smoking or exposure to cigarette smoke.

Cough suppressants, if this absolutely necessary. Suppressing a cough is not always the best approach, as coughing is a natural response to remove mucus and germs. Additionally, many over-the-counter cough suppressants have not been shown to work.

There are many herbal and non-pharmaceutical medicines that claim to relieve the symptoms of a cold or reduce the time and severity. These should be used with care, as they can have side effects and may also interact with other medicines. Seek professional advice before using these treatments.

Some of the most popular complementary supplements for treating the common cold are vitamin C, zinc and echinacea, and it has been suggested that high doses of these can help reduce the length and severity of a cold, and also prevent it in the first place. There is no clear scientific evidence that confirms this.

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Support & online resources

For additional support and resources, visit:

- The National Prescribing Service (NPS) has information about treating the common cold www.nps.org.au
- The Australian Lung Foundation www.lungfoundation.com.au
- The National Asthma Council Australia www.nationalasthma.org.au