



Common Cold

What is a cold and what causes it?

A cold is an infection of the nose and upper airways caused by a virus. Many different viruses can cause a cold. This is why colds recur, and immunisation against colds is not possible. Children tend to have more colds than adults as adults have built up immunity to many viruses. Adults have an average of 2-4 colds a year. Young children have an average of 3-8 colds a year.

What are the symptoms of a cold?

- The common symptoms are a blocked (congested) nose, a runny nose, and sneezing. At first there is a clear discharge (mucus) from the nose. This often becomes thick and yellow/green after 2-3 days.
- You may feel generally unwell and tired, and you may develop a mild fever.
- Sometimes there is a mild sore throat, hoarseness and a cough.
- A build up of mucus behind the eardrums may cause dulled hearing or mild earache.

Symptoms typically peak after 2-3 days and then gradually ease off. Symptoms have usually gone within a week, but in some cases they can take three weeks to clear completely. In particular, a cough may linger for up to three weeks, often when other symptoms have gone.

What are the treatments for a cold?

There is no magic cure for the common cold! There is no treatment that will shorten the length of the infection. Treatment aims to ease symptoms whilst your immune system clears the virus.

Note: antibiotics do not kill viruses, so are of no use for colds.

The most useful treatments are:

- **Paracetamol** or **ibuprofen** which will ease fever, sore throats, aches and pains.
- **Make sure you drink enough or give your child plenty to drink.** Drink plenty to prevent dehydration which can make you feel more tired, and may cause a headache. Hot drinks are often soothing too.
- **A steam inhalation** may help to 'clear the nose'. A hot steamy shower is perhaps a safer option.



- A **menthol sweet** may also clear a bunged up nose for a while.
- **Saline drops** is a popular treatment for a bunged-up nose in a baby. Consider putting a few drops of saline (salt water) into the nose just before feeds. You can buy saline drops from pharmacies.
- Some preparations based on the herb of *Echinacea purpurea* (a herbal remedy) might decrease the severity of cold symptoms in adults.

Healthcare professionals no longer advise using over-the-counter cough and cold medicines for children under 6 years of age. There is no evidence that they work and they could cause side-effects, such as allergies, drowsiness or hallucinations.

Note: paracetamol and ibuprofen are not classed as cough and cold medicines and can still be given to children.

Are there any possible complications from a cold?

Most colds do not cause complications. Sometimes the infection travels to the chest, sinuses, or ears and cause a bacteria infection. Therefore, consult a doctor if you develop any of these symptoms:

- Fever, wheezing or headaches that become worse or severe.
- Fast breathing, shortness of breath, chest pains, or if you cough up blood.
- Noisy breathing or difficulty breathing - especially in a child.
- Unusual irritability or persistent crying in a baby.
- Persistent earache.
- Drowsiness or confusion.
- A cough that persists longer than 3-4 weeks.
- Any symptom that you cannot explain and you are concerned about.

Can colds be prevented?

- People with colds should not get too close to others. For example, kissing, hugging, etc.
- If you have a cold, wash your hands often with soap and water as viruses are passed on by touch.
- Avoid sharing towels, flannels, etc if you have a cold, or with anyone who has a cold.
- For children, discourage the sharing of toys belonging to a child with a cold. If your child has a cold, consider washing toys with soapy water after use.