

## The Common Cold



**The common cold is an infection of your nose, sinuses, throat and windpipe. Colds spread easily, especially within homes, classrooms and workplaces. More than 200 different viruses can cause colds. There's no cure for a common cold, but it usually goes away within a week to 10 days. If you don't feel better in 10 days, you should think about seeing your Doctor.**

## What is the common cold?

A cold is a contagious upper respiratory infection that affects your nose, throat, sinuses and windpipe (trachea). You may have heard that the common cold is a coronavirus. In fact, more than 200 different types of viruses can cause a cold. The most common cold virus is the rhinovirus.

We call colds "common" because as their name implies, they're widespread. You'll probably have more colds in your lifetime than any other illness. Adults catch two to three colds a year, while young children come down with a cold four or more times a year.

## What are the symptoms of the common cold?







Common cold symptoms typically appear in stages. The common cold stages include early, active and late.

## Stage 1: Early (Days 1 to 3)

Within one to three days of picking up a cold virus, you may notice a tickle in your throat. About half of all people with colds report a tickly or sore throat as their first

### Common Cold

Within one to three days of picking up a cold virus, you'll get symptoms like:

 <p>Sneezing.</p>	 <p>Runny nose.</p>
 <p>Headache.</p>	 <p>Sore throat.</p>
 <p>Cough.</p>	 <p>Nasal congestion.</p>
 <p>Fever (most common in children).</p>	

symptom. Other common cold symptoms you may experience during this early stage include:

- Sneezing.
- Runny nose.
- Stuffy nose (nasal congestion).
- Cough.
- Hoarseness.

## **Stage 2: Active (Days 4 to 7)**

Symptoms typically worsen or peak during this stage. In addition to the symptoms in stage 1, you may experience:

- Body aches.
- Headache.
- Runny eyes and nose.
- Fatigue.
- Fever (more common in children).

## **Stage 3: Late (Days 8 to 10)**

Colds usually begin to wind down during this stage. You may be free and clear at this point. But some symptoms can persist.

Some people develop a nagging cough that can last up to two months after a respiratory infection.

If your symptoms get worse and/or your fever returns, make a trip to your Doctor. You may have developed another infection or a complication, such as bronchitis, sinusitis or pneumonia.

## **What causes the common cold?**

Rhinoviruses cause up to 50% of common colds. There are more than 100 different rhinoviruses. But other types of viruses, such as coronaviruses, can also cause colds. More than 200 different viruses can cause a cold.

## **Is the common cold contagious?**

Yes. Colds spread easily from person to person. For you to become infected, the virus has to get to one of your mucous membranes — the moist lining of your

nostrils, eyes or mouth. That happens when you touch a surface or breathe moist air that contains the cold virus.

For example, when a person who's sick sneezes or coughs, they launch droplets of fluid containing the cold virus into the air. If you breathe in those droplets, the cold virus takes root in your nose. You can also leave virus particles on surfaces you touch when you're sick. If someone else touches those surfaces and then touches their nostrils, eyes or mouth, the virus can get in.

## **How long is the common cold contagious?**

You can be contagious for up to two weeks, even spreading a cold a day or two before you have symptoms. But you're most contagious when your symptoms are at their worst — usually the first three days you feel sick.

## **What is the common cold incubation period?**

The incubation period is the time between when you're infected and when your symptoms first appear. The common cold incubation period is between 12 hours and three days after exposure to the virus.

## **How is the common cold diagnosed?**

A healthcare provider will ask you about your symptoms and perform a physical exam. During the exam, the provider will check for signs, such as:

- Swelling in your nostrils.
- A stuffy nose.
- A red, irritated throat.
- Swollen lymph nodes in your neck.
- Clear lungs.

## **How is the common cold treated?**

There's no cure for a cold. You have to let it run its course. Most colds go away on their own within seven to 10 days and don't turn into anything more serious. Common cold treatment includes over-the-counter (OTC) medications to help reduce your symptoms and keep you comfortable until you recover.

## **Why can't antibiotics cure a cold?**

Antibiotics are medications that fight infections caused by bacteria. Because viruses cause colds, antibiotics don't work for colds. Sometimes, children may

develop complications from bacteria, such as an ear infection or pneumonia. Healthcare providers may prescribe antibiotics to treat these illnesses.

## What cold medicines relieve symptoms?

There are many OTC common cold medication options available to treat your symptoms. But some of these medications aren't safe for children. Be careful not to combine medicines that treat multiple symptoms. You could get too much of some ingredients, which could cause other health problems, including organ damage.

Medications that may relieve cold symptoms include:

- **Pain relievers:** may relieve headaches and fever.
- **Decongestants:** You can use medications like pseudoephedrine
- **Antihistamines:** May stop sneezing and a runny nose.
- **Cough suppressants:** Can help reduce coughing. Providers don't routinely recommend these for children under 5 years of age.
- **Expectorants:** May help thin and loosen mucus.

## Can the common cold be prevented?

There are several steps you can take to prevent a cold, including:

- **Washing your hands:** Wash your hands frequently, especially before eating or preparing food. Also, wash your hands after using the bathroom, wiping your nose or coming into contact with someone who has a cold.
- **Avoiding touching your face:** Cold viruses spread from your hands to your eyes, nose and mouth.
- **Cleaning frequently used surfaces:** Viruses can live on doorknobs and other places people often touch.
- **Using hand sanitizers:** When you can't wash your hands with soap and water, use alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- **Strengthening your immune system:** Get enough sleep, eat a healthy diet and exercise so your body is ready to fight off germs.
- **Staying home:** To make sure you don't spread the cold to others, stay home when you're sick.

## How long does a common cold last?

Most colds go away on their own within seven to 10 days. Most people recover quickly and the common cold doesn't lead to anything more serious.

## Can a cold kill you?

The common cold isn't fatal. In some people — especially those with weakened immune systems — a cold could lead to other conditions that could cause severe health problems.

## **What are the best common cold remedies?**

You may have heard that supplements and herbal remedies, such as zinc, vitamin C and echinacea can treat and prevent colds. Researchers haven't found that any of those remedies can prevent colds. But zinc may shorten the illness and reduce symptoms. However, it may cause permanent loss of smell, especially when you use it in nasal sprays.

The best common cold self-care remedy is to get plenty of rest. Consider taking time off from work for at least the first few days of illness. Not only will you have more time to rest, but you'll avoid spreading germs to others.

Also, make sure you're drinking plenty of fluids to keep your nose and throat moist. Avoid alcohol and caffeine because they have a drying effect.

## **When should I see a Doctor for the common cold?**

Contact a healthcare provider if you have any of the following symptoms:

- High fever.
- Chest pain.
- Ear pain.
- Asthma flare-up or difficulty breathing.
- Symptoms lasting more than 10 days or getting worse.

## **Does having a cold affect pregnancy?**

Having a cold during pregnancy isn't usually dangerous. But you do need to be careful with what cold medications you take to treat symptoms. Your healthcare provider can let you know which ones are safe to use during pregnancy. If you think you may have the flu or you develop a fever, you should contact your provider right away. You may need immediate treatment.

## **Why do colds occur in the winter?**

You can catch a cold any time of year, but it's more likely during colder months. In winter, people stay indoors and are in closer contact with each other.

A recent study in mice suggests cold temperatures may also affect your immune system's response. Researchers found that when cooler air lowered nose temperature, mouse immune systems had a harder time stopping the rhinovirus from multiplying. The same may be true in humans.

## **Common cold vs. Covid — what's the difference?**

Coronaviruses are a group of viruses that can cause upper respiratory infections. While rhinoviruses cause most types of common cold, coronaviruses do cause some. Most people recover quickly from these common colds.

Coronaviruses may also travel into your lungs and lead to pneumonia and other complications that can be fatal. The novel (new) coronavirus discovered in 2019 causes a specific disease known as COVID-19. Early symptoms that make COVID-19 different from the common cold include:

- Fever.
- Chills and shaking.
- Shortness of breath (dyspnea).
- Loss of taste or smell (anosmia).
- Diarrhea.

However, the omicron variant of COVID-19 causes slightly milder symptoms, making it easier to confuse with a cold. Omicron symptoms similar to the common cold include:

- Runny nose.
- Cough.
- Sore throat.
- Headache.
- Nasal congestion.

## **Common cold vs. flu — what's the difference?**

It can be hard to tell whether you have a cold or the flu since many of the symptoms are the same. Both are widespread during the colder months and affect your upper respiratory system. But different viruses cause cold and flu. The flu comes from the influenza virus, while many other types of viruses cause colds.

The main difference between cold and flu is that you're more likely to have a fever and chills with flu. Adults don't usually get a fever with a common cold, although kids sometimes do.

The flu also causes body aches and more severe symptoms than a cold. Although both the cold and flu can lead to complications, flu complications can be life-threatening.

## **Common cold vs. chest cold — what's the difference?**

A chest cold, or short-term (acute) bronchitis, causes irritation and a buildup of mucus in your lungs. Common colds turn into chest colds when the virus travels from your nose and throat to your lungs. Occasionally, bacteria cause chest colds.

You can have a cough with a common cold or a chest cold. But chest colds produce a wet cough, meaning you may feel or cough up phlegm. You may also have:

- A cough that keeps you up all night.
- Shortness of breath.
- A sore chest.

Although it may cause discomfort, the common cold is usually harmless. You can manage the symptoms of a cold with medications.

Speed up your recovery by getting plenty of rest and fluids and avoid being around others. If you don't feel better in 10 days, see a Doctor.