

The Common Cold:

What It Is and How to Treat It

WHAT IS A COLD?

The term "common cold" refers to a mild upper respiratory viral infection involving, to variable degrees, sneezing, nasal congestion and discharge (rhinorrhea), sore throat, cough, low grade fever, headache and malaise. It is the most frequent acute illness in the United States and throughout the industrialized world.

The Common Cold

- *A group of symptoms caused by a large number of different viruses.*
- *Symptoms usually include nasal congestion, runny nose, and sneezing. A sore throat may be present on the first day but usually disappears; runny nose and congestion become more bothersome. Colds typically last for 3 to 7 days, but many people have symptoms for up to two weeks.*
- *The virus is carried on the hands of people with a cold. The virus remains alive on the skin and can infect another person for at least 2 hours. Some cold viruses can live on surfaces (such as a counter top, door handle, or phone) for several hours. Droplets containing viral particles can be exhaled (blown out) into the air by a person with a cold as the person breathes, coughs, or sneezes.*
- *Most treatments are aimed at relieving some of the symptoms of the cold, but do not shorten or cure the cold. Antibiotics are not useful for treating the common cold; antibiotics are only helpful for illnesses caused by bacteria, not viruses.*



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How to Treat a Cold

There is no specific treatment for the viruses that cause the common cold. Most treatments are aimed at relieving some of the symptoms of the cold, but do not shorten or cure the cold. **Antibiotics are not useful for treating the common cold**; antibiotics are only helpful for illnesses caused by bacteria, not viruses.

The following are suggested treatments for symptoms caused by the common cold.¹ The suggested treatments include both the active ingredient and an example of a common brand name for the product.

Runny nose and nasal congestion

- Pseudoephedrine (Sudafed®) is a decongestant that can improve nasal congestion, but can cause increased heart rate or insomnia.
(60 mg every 4-6 hours as needed)
- Guaifenesin (Mucinex®), is a mucous thinning agent that can help with nasal secretions and does not affect alertness or sleep.
(600 mg every 12 hours as needed)
- Antihistamines such as diphenhydramine (Benadryl®) may also help, but can cause side effects such as drowsiness and drying of the eyes, nose, and mouth.
(25-50 mg every 6 hours as needed)
- Nasal inhalers such as Afrin® or Neosynephrine® can relieve runny nose and sneezing, but must **NOT** be used for more than **ONE WEEK** at a time.
(2 puffs each nostril twice a day)

- Cromolyn sodium (NasalCrom®, a non-prescription medicine) can relieve runny nose, cough, and sneezing.
(2 puffs each nostril twice a day as needed)
- Heated, humidified air can improve symptoms of nasal congestion and runny nose, and causes few to no side effects.
- Saline nose spray can be used to relieve congestion and moisturize nasal passages as often as needed.

Sore throat and headache

- A mild pain reliever such as acetaminophen (Tylenol®)
(1-2 tablets, 325-650 mg, every 4 hours as needed)
- A non-steroidal anti-inflammatory agent such as ibuprofen (Motrin®) or naproxen (Aleve®)
(Ibuprofen—2-3 tablets, 400-600 mg, every 6 hours. Naproxen—1-2 tablets, 220-440 mg, every 12 hours as needed)
- A warm salt water gargle
(1 teaspoon of salt in 8 oz. of warm water as often as needed)



Cough

In clinical trials, cough suppressants were no more effective in reducing the duration or severity of coughing due to cold than a placebo (a non-drug substitute).

¹ Persons with underlying medical conditions and those who use other over-the-counter or prescription medications should speak with their healthcare provider or pharmacist to ensure that these treatments are safe.

Call your doctor if you experience any of the following:

- Trouble breathing.
- A fever of 104°F or higher or any fever that doesn't respond to home treatment or lasts more than 3 days.
- New symptoms that are not part of a cold, like a stiff neck or shortness of breath.
- Coughing up bloody mucus.
- You have pain in your face, eyes, or teeth that does not get better with home treatment, or you have a red area on your face or around your eyes.
- Your cold seemed to be getting better after a few days but is now getting worse with new symptoms.

HOW TO PREVENT A COLD

Wash your hands, wash your hands, wash your hands!

Hand washing is a highly effective way to prevent the spread of infection. Hands should be wet with water and plain soap, and rubbed together for 15 to 30 seconds. **Alcohol-based hand rubs are a good alternative** for disinfecting hands if a sink is not available.

Hands should be washed before preparing food and eating, and after using the bathroom, handling garbage or dirty laundry, touching animals, and coughing, blowing the nose or sneezing.

In addition, **tissues should be used to cover the mouth when sneezing or coughing.** Sneezing/coughing into the sleeve of one's clothing (at the inner elbow) is another means of containing sprays of saliva and secretions and has the advantage of not contaminating the hands.