

I Have a Cold—What Do I Need to Know?

The **common cold** is an infection that can be caused by many different viruses.

What Is a Cold and How Is It Spread?

- Colds are very common—most people get more than one cold a year. Colds are passed from one person to another during daily activities. For example, touching your eyes or nose after touching a surface contaminated by the virus, or shaking hands with a person with a cold. You can also “breathe in” the virus. People can spread the cold virus before they have any symptoms or even know they have a cold.
- Symptoms usually last 7 to 10 days and include a runny or stuffy nose, sneezing, a sore throat, coughing, congestion, watery eyes, feeling tired, mild fever, and headache. Complications are very rare, but patients can develop ear infections, sinus infections, and lung infections (pneumonia).

What Should I Do If I Have a Cold?

- Colds get better on their own without treatment as the body's immune system attacks the virus. You do not need to see a doctor for mild to moderate symptoms. Treatment is focused on reducing symptoms while your body heals. Mild fever and headache can be treated with over-the-counter medicines like acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Saline nasal sprays and decongestants can help with nasal congestion. Drinking plenty of fluids and resting allow your body to recover faster.
- If you have heart disease, ask your pharmacist if it is safe to take cold medicine.
- Try to avoid spreading the virus. Wash your hands or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer frequently if you or someone in your home has a cold. Sneeze into a tissue or into your bent arm. Stay home if possible.
- There is no need for antibiotics to treat a common cold. Common antibiotics only kill bacteria. Since the common cold is caused by a virus and not bacteria, antibiotics will not help you get better any faster. In fact, unnecessary antibiotics can cause allergic reactions and side effects such as diarrhea. Widespread antibiotic use leads to the creation of “super bacteria” that are resistant to common antibiotics, making it more difficult to treat people who have actual bacterial infections and thus can be dangerous. Nevertheless, millions of people still take antibiotics for the common cold every year, thinking it will help them get better faster (it does not). You can help stop this trend by educating yourself about how to recognize a cold and avoiding antibiotics to treat it. That includes not taking any leftover antibiotics at your home.

When Should I See a Doctor?

- If you do not get better in 10 to 14 days, speak with a medical professional.

Is it a common cold or the flu?

	Common cold	Flu (influenza)
Cause	Many different respiratory viruses	Influenza virus
Transmission	Easily spread between people	
Symptom severity	Mild to moderate	May be severe
Common symptoms	Runny nose, cough, congestion, and sore throat	
Fever	Mild	Temperature higher than 101.4°F
Muscle aches	Mild	Severe
Exhaustion	Mild	Severe
Complications	Rare	Rare but dangerous complications are possible especially in young children, older adults, persons with chronic illnesses, and pregnant women
Treatment	Stay at home if possible Drink fluids Over-the-counter treatments for symptom relief	Seek medical advice

- Call your doctor or nurse if you develop high fever (temperature >101.4°F), severe whole-body aches or headache, rash, chest pain, shortness of breath, wheezing, or confusion. These may be signs of a more serious infection like the flu or pneumonia.
- Ask your doctor if there is a telephone advice line you can call. This may help avoid an unnecessary trip to the doctor and help answer questions.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- CDC: Non-Specific Upper Respiratory Tract Infection
<https://www.cdc.gov/antibiotic-use/community/for-patients/common-illnesses/colds.html>
- American Association of Family Physicians:
Treating the Common Cold in Adults
<https://www.aafp.org/afp/2012/0715/p153-s1.html>

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