Common cold

A cold may last only a few days, but it can make you uncomfortable. There's no cure, but there are things that may help you feel better.

What happens?

A common cold is an infection of your nose and upper airways, caused by a virus. Lots of different viruses can cause a cold.

Sneezing spreads the virus in tiny droplets through the air, and onto surfaces such as door handles, where people pick it up on their hands.

Children get more colds than adults. Each year, most children get about five colds, and most adults get two or three.

What are the symptoms?

Colds often start with a sore throat. Soon, you start sneezing and get a runny nose. You may get a headache and chills. Young children may get a temperature. Later, you'll probably get a blocked nose. The blood vessels in your nose swell up, and the mucus from your nose can get thick and green. Symptoms are usually at their worst after about 3 days.

You may get a dry cough that keeps you awake at night. Later on, you might cough up mucus. About half of people with a cold get muscle aches and pains. You may feel tired and irritable, or lose your appetite.

The symptoms are similar to those of flu, but flu is more serious. If you have flu, you're likely to get ill suddenly, get a temperature, and feel so weak you cannot get out of bed.

What treatments work?

There's no cure for the common cold. Symptoms usually go after a few days. There are lots of things you can try to make yourself feel better.
Things you can do for yourself

The aim of these treatments is to make you feel better while you recover from your cold. You may want to rest more, keep warm, and drink plenty of fluids. Hot drinks can be comforting.

People often try breathing in steam to clear a blocked nose. A warm shower or bath may help clear your nose.

Medicines

Cold remedies include painkillers, decongestants, antihistamines, and cough medicines. These remedies should not usually be taken by children under six years old. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist before you give any medicines to a young child.

Aches and pains can be treated with painkillers including paracetamol, NSAIDs, and aspirin. Lots of cold remedies contain paracetamol, so check the labels to make sure you don’t take more than the stated dose. Children under 18 should not take aspirin.

Decongestants can help unblock your nose for several hours, but some people should not take decongestants. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if they’re suitable for you.

Some cold remedies contain antihistamines, which may help with sneezing and a runny nose. But they don’t seem to make much difference.

Some cough medicines are meant to stop you coughing. These often contain the drug dextromethorphan. Other cough medicines aim to help you cough up mucus. These often contain the drug guaifenesin. We don’t know how well these treatments work. Ask your doctor if they are suitable for you first.

Antibiotics don’t work for the viruses that cause colds. They have side effects and when they are wrongly used, they can increase the number of germs in circulation that don’t respond to antibiotics anymore.

What will happen to me?

Your cold will probably clear up after 7 to 10 days. If you’re no better after a week or so, or if you’re worried about an old or young person with a cold, talk to a doctor.

Some people get other infections after a cold. These include ear infections, chest infections, and infection of the sinuses. Chest infections can be serious, especially in babies and older people. See your doctor if you are concerned.