

Patient information from BMJ

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Common cold

A cold may last only a few days, but it can make you uncomfortable and exhausted. 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 fever.

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 some flu symptoms, but flu is more serious. If you have flu, you're likely to get sick suddenly, have a fever, 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. And there are lots of things you can try to make yourself feel better.

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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.

Some people take extra **vitamin C** when they have a cold. There is some evidence that it might help your cold clear up a little faster, or that your symptoms might be milder. But the difference, if any, is likely to be small.

Taking vitamin C doesn't seem to prevent people catching colds in the first place.

Medicines

Cold remedies include:

- pain relievers
- 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 **pain relievers** including acetaminophen, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen, and aspirin.

Many cold remedies contain acetaminophen, so check the labels to make sure you don't take more than the stated dose.

Note: 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 are medicines usually used to treat allergies. Some of these may help with sneezing and a runny nose. But newer, 'non-drowsy' antihistamines don't seem to work.

Some **cough medicines** are meant to stop you coughing, while others aim to help you cough up mucus. But there isn't much good evidence about how well they work.

Antibiotics don't work for the viruses that cause colds - antibiotics kill bacteria, not viruses.

Antibiotics also have side effects and, when wrongly used, they can increase the number of germs in circulation that don't respond to antibiotics anymore. This is called "antibiotic resistance".

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.

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