

The Common Cold

What is the common cold? The common cold is an infection of the head and chest caused by a virus. It is a type of upper respiratory infection (URI). It can affect your nose, throat, sinuses, and ears. A cold can also affect the tube that connects your middle ear and throat, as well as your windpipe, voice box, and airways.

How does it occur? 200 different viruses can cause colds. The infection spreads when viruses are passed to others by sneezing, coughing, or personal contact. You may also become infected by over handling objects that were touched by someone with a cold.

You are more likely to get a cold if:

- Your are emotionally or physically stressed

- You are tired

- You do not have a healthy diet

- You are a smoker or are exposed to second hand smoke

- You are living/working in crowded conditions

People tend to get fewer colds as they get older because they build up immunity to some of the viruses that can cause colds.

What are the symptoms? You usually start having cold symptoms one to three days after contact with a cold virus.

Symptoms may include:

- Scratchy or sore throat

- Sneezing, runny, or stuffy nose

- Cough

- Watery eyes

- Ear congestion

- Slight fever

- Tiredness

- Headache

- Loss of appetite

How is it diagnosed? Cold can usually be diagnosed from your symptoms. Your healthcare provider may need to examine you to rule out other serious infections, such as strep throat and sinusitis. Common colds are different from influenza (flu), even though both are caused by viruses. Influenza usually develops more suddenly than a cold. When you have the flu, you develop fever and muscle aches within a few hours, even as few as 1-2 hours. The symptoms of a cold develop more slowly and are usually milder.

How is it treated? There are no medicines that cure a cold. You can treat your symptoms with nonprescription medicines such as aspirin, acetaminophen, ibuprofen, nose drops or sprays, cough syrups and drops, throat lozenges, and decongestants. Check with your provider before you take any of these drugs if you are already taking other medicines.

How long do the effects last? Colds usually last one to two weeks. Sometimes you may get a bacterial infection after a cold, such as an ear infection or sinus infection.

How can I take care of myself?

- Get a lot of rest

- Drink a lot of fluids

- Use a humidifier

- Use nose drops to relieve nasal congestion

Call your healthcare provider if you have any of the following symptoms:

- Worsening earache
- Trouble breathing
- Swollen, tender lymph nodes in your neck
- Chest pain
- Skin rash
- Worsening sore throat
- With or yellow spots on you tonsils or throat
- A cough that get worse or becomes painful
- Temperature of 102 or higher that last more than 2 days
- Shaking chills
- Headache that last more than 2 days
- Confusion
- Lips, skin, or nails that look blue

What can be done to help prevent the spread of colds?

- Turn away from others and use tissues when you cough or sneeze
- Wash your hands after coughing, sneezing, or blowing your nose
- Wash your hand often and especially before touching food, dishes, glasses, silverware, or napkins
- Use paper cups and paper towels in bathrooms
- Don't let your nose or mouth touch public telephones or drinking fountains
- Don't share food or eating utensils with others
- Avoid close contact with others for the first two to four days

To lower your risk of catching a cold:

- Avoid close contact with people who have a cold
- Keep your hands away from your nose and mouth
- Wash your hands often, especially after coming in contact with someone who has a cold
- Eat healthy foods, especially fruits with vitamin C
- Get plenty of rest
- Do not smoke