

COLD AND FLU

There are over 200 different viruses that can cause colds. These viruses spread through the air when someone with a cold sneezes or coughs. You can often treat a cold without seeing your GP. You should begin to feel better in about a week or two.

Cold symptoms come on gradually and can include:

- blocked or runny nose
- sore throat
- headaches
- muscle aches
- cough
- sneezing
- a raised temperature
- pressure in your ears and face
- loss of taste and smell

The symptoms are the same in adults and children. Sometimes, symptoms last longer in children.

Antibiotics

GPs don't recommend antibiotics for colds because they won't relieve your symptoms or speed up your recovery. Antibiotics are only effective against bacterial infections and colds are caused by viruses.

Telling the difference between cold and flu

A cold is a milder respiratory illness than the flu. While cold symptoms can make you feel bad for a few days, flu symptoms can make you feel quite ill for a several days to weeks. The flu can also result in serious health problems such as pneumonia and hospitalizations.

How you can treat a cold yourself

There are things you can do to treat your cold at home. These include:

- rest and sleep
- keep warm
- drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration
- gargle salt water to soothe a sore throat
- speak to your pharmacist about over the counter medicine such a decongestants and painkillers.

See a GP if:

- your symptoms don't improve after three weeks

- your symptoms get suddenly worse
- your temperature is very high, or you feel hot and shivery
- you're concerned about your child's symptoms
- you're finding it hard to breathe or develop chest pain
- you have a long-term medical condition – for example, diabetes, or heart, lung, kidney or neurological disease
- you have a weakened immune system – for example, because you're having chemotherapy

How to avoid spreading a cold

- Limit contact with people as much as possible during the first three days of their illness. Advise people you are sick if you have been in contact with them and ask them to wash their hands.
- Wash hands after coughing, sneezing or blowing nose. Hand washing removes cold viruses from the skin of the hand and fingers. Hand washing is particularly important after contact with young children with colds.
- Keep fingers out of the eyes and nose.
- Wash surfaces with disinfectant which may be contaminated.
- Germicidal hand lotions do not reliably kill rhinovirus, the most important cold virus.

Cough basics

A cough is a common reflex action that clears the throat of mucus or foreign irritants. There are a number of conditions that can cause frequent coughing including infection (viral or bacterial), asthma, smoking, chronic lung disease, medicines, or allergies.

Most cough episodes will clear up, or at least significantly improve, within two weeks. If you cough up blood, are wheezy, or short of breath, you should see your doctor. You should also be seen if your cough has been present for over four weeks.

Self-care treatments for cough include – drinking more fluids, warm soothing liquids such as lemon and honey (although avoid honey in children under 12 months age), elevating the head of the bed, and avoiding smoke exposure. You could also talk to your pharmacist about cough syrups.