

Taking care of your upper respiratory infection

A COLD is certainly one of the more unpleasant miseries we must face. Adults average three colds per year, six if we smoke. Here are suggestions for making this plague as tolerable as possible. With luck, you'll barely notice you have symptoms.

Upper respiratory infections are caused by more than two hundred different viruses, no two exactly alike. Symptoms can last from 24 hours to four weeks. You may have any variation of sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, cough, aches, pains, and a "fuzzy head."

One particularly nasty virus is the influenza virus, which causes the "flu": a severe cold that begins suddenly. Influenza causes a high fever and severe aching. Otherwise, colds rarely cause fevers in adults.

Here's what to do to relieve your cold's symptoms.

In general:

1. Dry air worsens cold viruses. Moist air helps your body kill them. Drink at least two quarts per day of water, tea, and/or soda. You should be drinking enough so you have to empty your bladder every hour.
2. Sleep with a vaporizer or humidifier at your bedside. Point the mist right at your face, so your pillow gets wet. Plain water is all you need in the vaporizer.
3. Sucking on a **zinc lozenge** every two hours may reduce cold symptoms. (It's like a cough drop that says "zinc" right on the label.) The major side effect is a risk of nausea. Limit zinc intake to 100 mg per 24 hours, and don't use it for more than a week.
4. Some people find relief by taking **echinacea**, an herb you can buy without a prescription. Avoid echinacea if you have an autoimmune disease or are taking immune suppressive drugs. Don't mix this with other herbs. Best brands are Sav-On and Origin (at Target)
5. Above all, if you smoke, stop smoking.

Aches, pains, headache, fever, feeling like you haven't slept for a week or were hit by a truck:

Take two Tylenol or one Advil every four hours. Or take one or two Aleve every eight hours.

Runny, congested nose:

If you're otherwise healthy, take 30–60 mg. of Sudafed four times per day as needed. **Pseudoephedrine**, the generic drug, works just as well. Avoid any deconges-

tant if you have severe high blood pressure or heart disease. Too much Sudafed may dry out your throat or make you feel jumpy, like too much coffee. If you take pseudoephedrine at bedtime, you may also need Benedryl (generic name diphenhydramine) to help you sleep. Spray decongestants like Afrin work well, but never use them for more than three days.

Sore throat:

Gargle every 5 to 10 minutes with water, tea, or soda to rinse the irritating mucous from your throat. (Actually, this is more a "swish and swallow" to rinse off your throat.) When this doesn't do the trick, try Sucrets throat lozenges, available in any pharmacy.

Cough:

Drinking lots of water and using the night-time vaporizer helps most coughs. If you need more help, take 30 mg. of dextromethorphan every eight hours. This is a common ingredient in many over-the-counter cough remedies, but unfortunately most brands have way too little. **Delsym** syrup is the major brand with enough dextromethorphan. NyQuill and Comtrex have enough dextromethorphan but are too loaded with grogginess-inducing antihistamines to be useful during the day. There are several other brands; read labels.

Contact our office if you develop any of the following symptoms:

1. Fever over 101 degrees for more than one or two days.
2. If you feel really sick, not just miserable or achy all over.
3. If you can see dots of white pus on your tonsils or throat.
4. If you have chest pain that feels like someone stuck a knife into your back or side (not due to coughing and not just in the center of your chest).
5. If you become short of breath, not just because of a stuffy nose.
6. If you've been exposed to person with a known strep throat within the past two weeks or had a physician-diagnosed strep throat yourself in the last year.
7. If you have pain in your sinuses—in the bones surrounding your eyes and nose—and have rotten-tasting mucus running down the back of your throat.

Healthful Hints

I can't be sick! You have to give me antibiotics!

IT'S amazing how often people ask to “get rid of this thing,” meaning they have an important engagement or they're don't want to get sicker. They're **megafrustrated**, and they want something to get rid of these symptoms immediately!

You may feel that if we took you seriously—if we really understood how **bad** you feel—you'd get a prescription for antibiotics. At least we'd be “doing something!”

Here's the catch: no antibiotic in the world can kill a cold virus. There is no cure for the common cold. The complete lack of benefit from antibiotics for colds is the best proved scientific fact in medicine—even if you've had this dang cold for two weeks.

Many people aren't really sure about the difference between bacteria and viruses. They're all “bugs,” and antibiotics kill bugs. But viruses and bacteria are completely different. Viruses aren't even really alive: they're collections of DNA and protein that take over the cell machinery in your body to make copies of themselves. Bacteria are like microscopic plants and can live on their own in many different situations. It's easy to kill bacteria with antibiotics; it's much harder to kill something like a virus that was never alive in the first place.

Getting sick was **not** your fault. Cold viruses are incredibly good at getting spread around. You catch the virus by touching a surface someone has sneezed or coughed on and then touching your nose or eyes.

No matter what anyone does, you'll almost certainly get over your cold within a few days. Meanwhile, it would be easy to make you worse in the heroic effort to “do something.” For example, an allergic reaction to penicillin shots kills 1 out of 10,000 people who receive them. Dr. Gagné's son wound up in UCLA Hospital for a week because of a needless prescription for a cold.

Antibiotics have been proven to be useless for colds in study after study. Why do so many people demand them? Maybe Doctor Oldtimer always gave everyone a shot. Maybe you received antibiotics just before your cold was going to go away anyway, but you attributed the result to the medication. Perhaps you once had pneumonia or a sinus infection or stubborn bronchitis

for which antibiotics were necessary, and now you “just want to make sure” that the previous complication does not recur. But antibiotics are proven not to prevent later bacterial infections. You are just as likely to get sick, but you will become infected with antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Finally, prescribing unneeded antibiotics has led to an epidemic of highly resistant “super bugs.”

It's true that cold viruses may make you more susceptible to subsequent bacterial infections. So if you get a cold, begin to get better, and then become sick again, antibiotics may be necessary for the new, secondary bacterial infection. (Of course, you may simply have caught a new viral infection. If you're not sure, we're happy to help you figure this out.)

Here are the main reasons why people need antibiotics:

1. A strep throat, caused by strep bacteria and thus susceptible to treatment. You may have a strep throat if you have a fever of 100 degrees or more, if there is white pus on your tonsils or throat, or if there are enlarged and tender lymph nodes (“glands”) under the angle of your jaw. Suspect a strep throat if you know you've been exposed to strep in the last two weeks or if a doctor said you had a strep throat within the past year.
2. If you have emphysema or certain other lung diseases you should receive antibiotics—even for virus infections—because they are of proven value. We may treat very elderly patients or those with chronic illnesses like diabetes or heart disease with antibiotics sooner than other patients, because their immune systems may not be as strong as we'd like.
3. Upper respiratory infections lasting for more than a month and which are not simply post-cold allergies.
4. Sinus infections or “sinusitis”: pain in the bones surrounding your nose and eyes, plus rotten-tasting mucous draining down the back of your throat.
5. On rare occasion people just feel bad for days on end. This may be due to a bacterial infection, or something else may be going on unrelated to a cold. Helping you sort this out is our job. Please feel free to call or come in if you're not sure.