

Colds

What is a cold and what causes it?

A cold is an infection of the nose and upper airways. Adults and older children have an average of 2-4 colds a year while children may have as many as eight or 10.

Colds are caused by viruses and can be spread in several ways.

- They can be spread by airborne droplets from coughs and sneezes.
- If you have a cold and you touch your nose or eyes and then touch someone else, you may pass the virus on to them.
- Or if you touch an object, such as a door handle, the virus may be transferred to the object. If someone touches the object a short time later and then touches their mouth, nose or eyes, they may become infected.

What are the symptoms of a cold?

The common symptoms are a blocked nose, a runny nose, and sneezing. At first there is a clear discharge from the nose. This may become thick and yellow/green after 2-3 days. The symptoms of a cold usually begin two to three days after you become infected, and last for two to 14 days. Most people recover from a cold within a week.

- You may feel generally unwell and tired, and you may develop a fever.
- Common symptoms include a sore throat, hoarseness and a cough.
- A build up of mucus behind the eardrums may cause dulled hearing or mild earache.

Symptoms typically peak after 2-3 days and then gradually ease off. Symptoms have usually gone within a week, but in some cases they can take three weeks to clear completely. In particular, a cough may linger for up to three weeks, often when other symptoms have gone. The symptoms, particularly cough, tend to be worse and last longer in smokers.

What are the treatments for a cold?

There is no magic cure for the common cold! There is no treatment that will shorten the length of the infection. Treatment aims to ease symptoms whilst your immune system clears the virus. Note: antibiotics do not kill viruses, so are of no use for colds. The most useful treatments are:

Paracetamol or **ibuprofen** which will ease fever, sore throats, aches and pains.

Make sure you drink enough. A fever may cause you to lose extra body fluid by sweating. This may lead to mild dehydration which can make you feel more tired, and may cause a headache. Let your thirst be your guide. Hot drinks are often soothing to.

You can buy many 'cold remedies' at pharmacies. There is no convincing evidence that they do any good, but some people find them helpful.

Are there any possible complications from a cold?

Most colds do not cause complications. Only consult your doctor or nurse if you suspect that a complication is developing. In particular, symptoms to look out for that may mean more than just a cold include:

- fever, wheezing or headaches that become worse or severe.
- fast breathing, shortness of breath, chest pains, or if you cough up blood.
- drowsiness or confusion.
- a cough that persists longer than 4 weeks.