

The common cold, or viral upper respiratory infection, is uncomfortable, but it is usually just an inconvenience. Common symptoms of a cold may include nasal congestion, runny nose, mucus in the throat, fever (at the beginning of the cold), cough or sore throat. The easiest way to catch a cold is from other people: by shaking their hands, being near their sneezes or by touching things they have touched.

This brochure is designed to give information about the common cold—including prevention, treatment and special considerations for children.

Preventing colds

To prevent the spread of viral upper respiratory infections:

- Keep your distance from people who are coughing and sneezing.
- Wash your hands frequently.
- Catch your cough or sneeze by bending your arm and coughing or sneezing into your elbow, clothing or a tissue.

Facts about colds

- “Sinus congestion,” colored nasal discharge and headaches frequently accompany colds and do not necessarily indicate that a serious infection is present.
- The onset of symptoms is rapid. Symptoms worsen during the first three to five days and then gradually begin to improve.
- A cold will usually go away in seven to 14 days, regardless of what you do. A mild cough may last two to three weeks.
- Some loss of appetite, fatigue or difficulty sleeping is normal with colds.
- Mild coughs often persist for two to three weeks after other symptoms improve.
- Bacterial infections, such as ear infections, bronchitis or sinus infections (which may need antibiotics to treat), complicate only a small percentage of colds.

Decision guide for managing colds

Fortunately, it is rare that colds require medical attention. Use this guide to help you decide when to use self-care steps, call for advice or seek help.

Use self-care steps

Over-the-counter cold medications will not cure your cold or make it go away faster. Some of these products, however, may decrease your discomfort (see *Self-care steps*).

Use self-care steps to manage typical symptoms:

- Sore/scratchy throat, mild hoarseness, cough
- Congestion, runny/stuffy nose, postnasal drip (mucus in the throat—colored nasal discharge is common)
- Fever (usually does not exceed 102° F and lasts less than three days)
- General aches

Call for advice

Occasionally, cold-like symptoms may be signs of a more serious illness that requires medical attention. You should call for advice if you have cold symptoms and are pregnant, have chronic respiratory problems (such as asthma or lung disease), are a heavy smoker or have other serious or chronic illnesses.

Call for advice if *adults* have the following:

- Symptoms that are getting worse after three to five days
- Symptoms that are not resolved after 14 days

Call for advice if *infants or children* have the following:

- A fever in an infant less than one year of age (rectal temperature at or greater than 100.4°F*) lasting longer than one day**
- Symptoms that worsen after three to five days or do not improve after seven to 10 days
- Lethargy
- Significant decrease in how much your child is drinking

*If you are taking your infant’s temperature rectally, you should subtract one degree.

**If you are taking your infant’s temperature by armpit, you should add one degree.

Seek help now

If cold-related symptoms worsen rapidly, call your doctor for instructions on how and where to get immediate assistance.

Seek help now if signs/symptoms of serious illness develop.

Adults:

- Ear pain, persistent facial pain, cough with high fever
- Wheezing or feeling short of breath

Infants and young children:

- Decreased responsiveness, poor eye contact, difficulty breathing, wheezing, not taking fluids

Self-care steps

Commonly used cold remedies do not cure or shorten a cold, but there are many steps you can take to minimize your symptoms as you wait for a cold to pass.

Raise the humidity at home

You can sit in the bathroom with the hot shower running or use a humidifier/vaporizer (a cool mist is preferred). If using a humidifier, empty and clean it daily following the manufacturer's instructions.

Drink extra fluids

Warm fluids are especially soothing for irritated throats.

Sleep with your head elevated

Raise your head on pillows to relieve nasal congestion.

Gargle with salt water or suck hard candy (adults and teens only)

Homemade salt water (1/4 teaspoon salt dissolved in eight ounces warm water), or a store version, will help relieve a sore throat. Hard candy is as effective for sore throats as cough drops.

Keep sinuses clear

Use a salt water nasal spray such as Ocean® or generic nasal spray. Nasal sprays or decongestants may provide temporary relief. Patients who have high blood pressure, diabetes, thyroid disease or are pregnant, should check with their doctor regarding recommendations for decongestant use.

If you do not have high blood pressure, plain pseudoephedrine (Sudafed®) helps with nasal congestion and mucus in the throat. Use only during the daytime. You can get pseudoephedrine (without a prescription) behind the pharmacy counter.

Talk to your doctor about whether your child should take pseudoephedrine or cold medicines.

Remain up and about

You may benefit from extra rest, but generally you'll feel better by staying moderately active. Because colds are viral infections, there are no medicines that will cure or shorten their length.

Medications for colds

Antibiotics are only effective for treating bacterial infections. Misuse of antibiotics increases the chances of developing infections that are resistant to treatment.

For adults who have colds, over-the-counter decongestants, pain relievers and cough suppressants may provide temporary relief of sore throats, runny noses, coughing or minor aches. Because of potential side effects, however, be sure to follow the recommended dosage and precautions. If you have high blood pressure, diabetes, coronary artery disease, thyroid disease or are pregnant, check with your doctor regarding the use of over-the-counter medications.

Zinc gluconate (Cold-EEZE®) may decrease the length of a cold if it is taken within 24 hours of the onset of cold symptoms. It may cause nausea and a bad taste in your mouth. Children, pregnant women and individuals with chronic kidney or liver disease should not use zinc.

Fevers that accompany colds are usually less than 102° F and last less than three days. Use medication for discomfort as recommended by your doctor.

Especially for children

- Children have colds more frequently than adults; having five to eight colds each year is not unusual.
- Over-the-counter medication is not recommended for children under age 2 without a doctor's input.
- Encourage children to drink a lot of fluids and remain active if they do not feel too tired.
- Do not treat cold symptoms with aspirin-containing products for anyone under age 21.

If you want more information on any medical topic, please contact the Park Nicollet Health Library. A medical librarian can help you find out what you need to know.

Web site: parknicollet.com/healthlibrary
E-mail: library@parknicollet.com
Phone: 952-993-5011

This brochure is based on guidelines developed by a team of health care experts at the Institute for Clinical Systems Improvement (ICSI), of which Park Nicollet Health Services is an active member. It will be reviewed and updated on a regular basis as scientific evidence changes. This material is for informational purposes only and is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment.

Viral Upper Respiratory Infections

Coping with Colds