

Common cold

What is the common cold?

The *common cold* is an infection of the upper respiratory passages, especially the nose and throat. It is also referred to as an upper respiratory infection (URI). It is caused by any of several types of viruses. It is quite different from influenza (the flu), which is caused by more serious viruses.

It is one of the most common causes of illness in children and adults.

What are the symptoms?

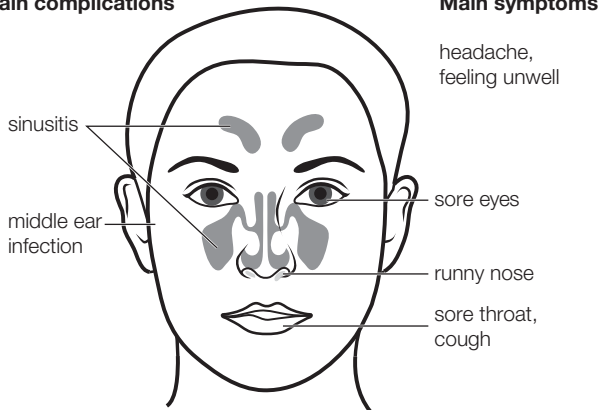
The usual symptoms are:

- runny or stuffy nose
- sore throat
- sneezing
- sore eyes
- feeling generally unwell
- slight fever.

Other possible symptoms are:

- headaches
- hoarseness
- high fever, with general aches and pains
- coughing.

Main complications



The main symptoms and complications of the common cold

How is it caught?

If you have a cold, you must have breathed in the virus, which is carried in the air after being coughed or sneezed out by another person with a cold.

What is the treatment?

There is no cure for the common cold. Antibiotics are of no use for viral infections and are only useful for certain complications. Fortunately, the body's immune system eventually is able to fight the virus by making antibodies. This takes several days. There are several things you can do to feel more comfortable, and to help your body's immune system relieve it more quickly:

- Rest. It is important to have plenty of sleep and rest when you have a cold. Physical activity puts extra demands on the immune system.
- Drink lots of fluids—at least 2 litres a day.
- Analgesics such as paracetamol and aspirin have several useful effects: they control fever and inflammation, and they are effective pain-killers. The adult dose of paracetamol or aspirin is 2 tablets every 4 hours (up to a *maximum* of 8 per day). Do NOT give aspirin to children (avoid it under 16 years).
- A blocked nose can be considerably helped by inhaling steam. One way is to put boiled water into a basin with menthol or friar's balsam, then put a towel over your head and breathe the steam in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Usually, coughing is to clear away unwanted material. If you have a dry cough, however, and it is very distressing, you may suppress it with a cough mixture. Ask your pharmacist or doctor about this.
- Gargling aspirin in water or lemon juice can soothe a sore throat in adults.
- Some people claim that taking large doses of vitamin C helps them recover more quickly from a cold. An average dose is 1 to 2 grams a day.

Your cold can be cleared up in a few days, but can last up to 10 days. Sometimes you can get a bacterial complication, which may require antibiotics. However, as a rule antibiotics are not prescribed because they are not necessary. Viruses are not destroyed by the commonly prescribed antibiotics and there is no evidence that giving them leads to a quicker recovery. If you get any of the following, you should see the doctor:

- a sore ear
- chest pain or difficulty in breathing
- a lot of green mucus from your chest or nose
- a sore throat without other symptoms
- a high fever not responsive to paracetamol.

How can it be prevented?

It is important to consider whether you have a reason for getting this cold. Regular exercise, a balanced diet and adequate sleep are important to keep your immune system in tiptop shape.