

Viral infection

What is a viral infection?

Viral infections are caused by *viruses*, which are microscopic germs and are quite different to the larger bacteria germs. They look like tiny crystals under the microscope. They are the most common cause of infection, but are usually not serious. We eventually get over the infection simply by resting and looking after any troublesome symptoms.

What are examples of viral infections?

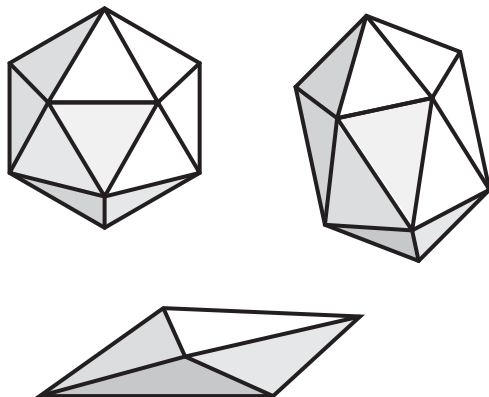
They usually cause upper respiratory tract infections (URTIs) such as the common cold and pharyngitis (sore throat). Other examples are influenza, gastroenteritis (especially in children), measles, rubella, mumps, chicken-pox, glandular fever and cold sores.

What are the typical features?

- The illnesses are bothersome, but usually not serious.
- Symptoms include feeling unwell, fever, aches and pains (including headache).
- The illness is 'self-limiting'; that is, it gets better naturally.
- The body builds a defence by producing antiviral antibodies.
- Normal routine antibiotics have no effect on the outcome.
- Serious complications are rare, but dehydration can be a special problem in children and we have to watch out for encephalitis (inflammation of the brain) with some viruses (such as mumps and measles).

What is the treatment?

- *Rest* to allow the body to shake off the virus.
- Take *analgesics* (paracetamol or aspirin) for fever and aches or pains. Give paracetamol, not aspirin, to children under 16 years.
- Take *adequate fluids*, especially children. Use clear fluids such as water.
- Use *decongestants* for URTIs.



Typical appearance of viruses magnified 115 000 times

Why not give antibiotics?

Routine antibiotics do not help viral infections and are usually not prescribed. Bacterial infections are generally more serious and are cleared up by antibiotics.

However, bacteria can attack the affected vulnerable parts of the body during a viral infection and cause problems such as middle ear infection, sinusitis, bronchitis, pneumonia and skin infection. You or your doctor may notice a yellowish-green nasal discharge or sputum, or pus in the middle ear or throat. Antibiotics may be prescribed to treat this secondary bacterial infection.

Certain viral infections such as influenza and hepatitis can be treated with special anti-viral antibiotics.

When should you contact your doctor?

Contact your doctor if any of the following occur:

- no improvement in condition or worsening after 48 hours
- refusal of a child to drink
- persistent vomiting
- difficulty in breathing
- persistent headache
- complaints that any light hurts the eyes
- neck stiffness
- paleness and drowsiness
- pain not relieved by analgesics
- pus-like discharge from the ear, nose or skin, or in the sputum.



The patient may feel miserable but it is usually short-lived!