
Common cold

- > A cold is a viral infection which affects the nose, ears and throat.
- > Colds normally last a few days and are not usually serious. However they can lead to other infections, especially in children.
- > Antibiotics do not cure a cold, but if symptoms do not improve in babies or young children see your doctor.

Young children, for example those under 3, tend to catch colds more frequently than adults because their immune systems are not yet fully developed. You can get one cold after another because there are so many different viruses circulating. There are more than 200 different types of viruses that can cause the common cold.

The common cold is not the same as [influenza, also known as flu](#). Influenza is caused by a different virus (influenza A or B). Influenza is much more serious than a cold and can be life-threatening.

How are colds spread?

Colds spread when a person breathes in the virus that has been coughed or sneezed into the air by an infectious person. People can also catch colds by touching an infectious person's hand and then touching their own eyes, nose or mouth.

Transmission of colds is common in daycare and at schools due to the presence of many children with under-developed immune systems and without best hygiene practices.

Viruses can survive for prolonged periods in the environment, in some cases more than 18 hours.

What are the signs and symptoms of a cold?

Colds usually mean you get a combination of:

- > runny or blocked nose
- > sore throat
- > fever (occasionally)
- > headache
- > cough
- > sneezing.

Symptoms normally only last a few days and most people fully recover without any ongoing problems after 7 to 10 days.

Coloured discharge (green or yellow) from the nose may occur in young children. This should be assessed by a doctor if it does not clear within a few days or if the child has a persistent fever and becomes more irritable.

Do I need to see a doctor?

It is not usually necessary for adults to see a doctor for a common cold infection if they have no medical at risk factors.

However, babies and very young children (under 3) need to be monitored to ensure the cold does not progress to a chest infection.

You should see your doctor if you or your child have severe symptoms such as:

- > persistent coloured discharge from the nose
 - > difficulty breathing
 - > high fever that does not respond to paracetamol
 - > vomiting frequently
 - > intense headache
 - > persistent cough.
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How are colds treated?

There are no specific medications that can cure the common cold, but there are some simple ways you can effectively relieve your symptoms.

For young children and babies, talk to your pharmacist who will advise you depending on your child's symptoms.

In adults, paracetamol is effective for fever and mild pain, and is a common ingredient in many cold and flu medications.

Nasal decongestants can also help to ease a blocked nose. These medications can make it easier to breathe but they should only be used by adults and should not be given to young children or babies.

Sore throats can be relieved with sipping on a warm drink with lemon and honey, gargling salt water and sucking a lozenge.

Make sure that you check the active ingredients on all product labels to ensure that you do not take a 'double dose' or accidentally give one to your child. Talk to your pharmacist if you are unsure about this.

Always ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice before using medications, to make sure that they are safe for you or your child.

How can the spread of colds be prevented?

Follow these tips to prevent the spread of germs:

- > **Cover coughs** and sneezes with your inner elbow, or use a tissue and throw it in the bin straight away.
- > **Wash your hands** often with soap and water or use antibacterial hand sanitisers, especially after coughing or sneezing.
- > **Clean surfaces** and objects regularly such as doorknobs, keyboards, phones and toys.
- > **Stay at home** if you have influenza and limit your contact with other people.

Read more about [protecting yourself from viruses](#).

Beating the bugs, colds and viruses

Where to get help

- > Speak to your chemist about over-the-counter treatments
- > Ring [healthdirect](#) on 1800 022 222
- > See your doctor if your symptoms are severe

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See also

- > [Protect yourself from viruses](#)
- > [Asthma triggers](#)
- > [Influenza \(flu\)](#)
- > [Influenza \(flu\) vaccine](#)
- > [Influenza \(flu\) vaccine for children](#)

Related sites

- > [Video – Beating the bugs, colds and viruses \(external site\)](#)
- > [healthdirect \(external site\)](#)