

Colds in Adults and Older Children

What is a cold and what causes it?

A cold is an infection of the nose and upper airways caused by a virus. Many different viruses can cause a cold. This is why colds recur, and immunisation against colds is not possible. Children tend to have more colds than adults as adults have built up immunity to many viruses.

What are the symptoms of a cold?

- The common symptoms are a blocked (congested) nose, a runny nose, and sneezing. At first there is a clear discharge (mucus) from the nose. This often becomes thick and yellow/green after 2-3 days. It may be difficult to sleep due to a blocked nose.
- You may feel generally unwell and tired, and you may develop a high temperature (fever).
- Sometimes there is a mild sore throat, hoarseness and a cough.
- A build up of mucus behind the eardrums may cause dulled hearing or mild earache.
- The symptoms, particularly cough, tend to be worse in smokers.

What are the treatments for a cold?

There is no magic cure for the common cold! The symptoms tend to be worse in the first 2-3 days, and then usually ease gradually over the next few days. Sometimes the symptoms take up to two weeks to clear fully. Antibiotics do not kill viruses, so are of no use for colds. Treatment aims to ease symptoms whilst your immune system clears the virus. The most useful treatments are:

- **Paracetamol, aspirin or ibuprofen** that will ease fever, sore throats, aches and pains.
NOTE: Children under 16 years should not be given aspirin.
- **Have lots to drink.** 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. So, drink plenty. Hot drinks are often soothing too.

You can buy many other 'cold remedies' at pharmacies. There is little evidence that they do much good but some people find them useful. For example, decongestant nose sprays, etc.

A note of caution

- If you do use a decongestant nasal spray, do not use it for more than a few days. They have an immediate effect to clear a blocked nose. However, if you use one for more than 5-7 days, a 'rebound' severe congestion of the nose may develop.
- 'Cold remedies' often contain several ingredients. Some may make you drowsy. This may be welcome at bedtime if you have difficulty sleeping with a cold. However, do not drive if you are drowsy. Some contain paracetamol, so

be careful not to take more than the maximum safe dose of paracetamol if you are already taking paracetamol tablets.

Are there any possible complications from a cold?

Most colds do not cause complications. A cold may trigger coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath in people with asthma or other lung diseases. Sometimes the infection travels to the chest, sinuses, or ears. Bacteria may thrive in the mucus so some people develop a 'secondary' bacterial infection of the chest, ears or sinuses. Consult a doctor if symptoms do not start to ease within a few days, or if you suspect that a complication is developing.