Common Cold

What is the common cold?

The common cold is one of the most prevalent illnesses, leading to more doctor visits and absences from school and work than any other illness every year. It is estimated that during a one-year period, people in the US will suffer one billion colds. Caused by a virus that inflames the membranes in the lining of the nose and throat, colds can be the result of more than 200 different viruses. However, among all of the cold viruses, the rhinoviruses and the coronaviruses cause the majority of colds.

When is the "cold" season?

People are most likely to have colds during fall and winter, starting in late August or early September until March or April. The increased incidence of colds during the cold season may be attributed to the fact that more people are indoors and close to each other. In addition, many cold viruses thrive in low humidity, making the nasal passages drier and more vulnerable to infection.

The Cold Viruses

The rhinoviruses and the coronaviruses are the most common causes of a cold. According to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), the rhinoviruses cause about one-third of all colds (30 to 35 percent), while the most common causes of adult colds are the coronaviruses. However, the cause of 30 to 50 percent of adult colds remains unidentified.

Rhinoviruses - There are more than 110 different rhinoviruses that cause most colds in early fall, spring, and summer. Named after the Greek word "rhin" for "nose," rhinoviruses thrive in the human nasal mucosa.

Coronaviruses - More than 30 different strains of the coronavirus exist, with three or four types affecting humans. The virus is most active in the winter and early spring.

What are the symptoms of the common cold?

The following are the most common symptoms of the common cold. However, each individual may experience symptoms differently. Symptoms may include:

- stuffy, runny nose
- scratchy, tickly throat
- sneezing
- watering eyes
- low-grade fever
- sore throat
- mild hacking cough
- achy muscles and bones
• headache
• mild fatigue
• chills
• watery discharge from nose that thickens and turns yellow or green

Colds usually start two to three days after the virus enters the body and symptoms last from several days to several weeks.

The symptoms of the common cold may resemble other medical conditions. Always consult your physician for a diagnosis.

**How is the common cold spread?**

The common cold is highly contagious. It is often spread through airborne droplets that are coughed or sneezed into the air by the contagious person and then inhaled by another person. Colds can also be spread by hand-to-hand or hand-to-infected-surface contact, after which a person touches his/her face.

**How is a cold different from the flu?**

A cold and the flu (influenza) are two different illnesses. A cold is relatively harmless and usually clears up by itself after a period of time, although sometimes it may lead to a secondary infection, such as an ear infection. However, the flu can lead to complications, such as pneumonia and even death. What may seem like a cold, could, in fact, be the flu. Be aware of these differences:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cold Symptoms</th>
<th>Flu Symptoms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low or no fever</td>
<td>High fever</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes a headache</td>
<td>Always a headache</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuffy, runny nose</td>
<td>Clear nose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sneezing</td>
<td>Sometimes sneezing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mild, hacking cough</td>
<td>Cough, often becoming severe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slight aches and pains</td>
<td>Often severe aches and pains</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mild fatigue</td>
<td>Several weeks of fatigue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sore throat</td>
<td>Sometimes a sore throat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal energy level</td>
<td>Extreme exhaustion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Who is at greater risk for catching the common cold?**

Children suffer more colds each year than adults, due to their immature immune systems and to the close physical contact with other children at school or daycare. In fact, the average child will have between 6 to 10 colds a year, while the average adult will get 2 to 4 colds a year. However, the average number of colds for children and adults will vary.
Prevention for the common cold:

The best way to avoid catching the common cold is to wash your hands frequently and avoid close contact with people who have colds. When around people with colds, do not touch your nose or eyes, because your hands may be contaminated with the virus.

People with colds should cough and sneeze in facial tissue and dispose of the tissue promptly, and then wash his/her hands immediately. In addition, cleaning surfaces with disinfectants that kill viruses can halt the spread of the common cold. Research has shown that rhinoviruses may survive up to three hours outside of the nasal mucosa.

How is the common cold diagnosed?

Most common colds are diagnosed based on reported symptoms. However, cold symptoms may be similar to certain bacterial infections, allergies, and other medical conditions. Always consult your physician for a diagnosis.

Vitamin C and the common cold

Many people believe taking large amounts of vitamin C will either prevent the common cold or reduce its symptoms. However, to date, studies have not indicated that high amounts of vitamin C affect the onset and symptoms of the common cold. In addition, taking large quantities of vitamin C over a long period of time may, in fact, be harmful, causing diarrhea and distorting urine and blood test results.

Treatment for the common cold:

Currently, there is no medication available to cure or shorten the duration of the common cold. However, the following are some treatments that may help to relieve some symptoms of the cold:

- over-the-counter cold medications, such as decongestants and cough medicine
- over-the-counter antihistamines (medication that helps dry up nasal secretions and suppress coughing)
- rest
- increased fluid intake
- pain relievers for headache or fever
- warm, salt water gargling for sore throat
- petroleum jelly for raw, chapped skin around the nose and lips
- warm steam for congestion

Note: Because colds are caused by viruses, treatment with antibiotics is ineffective. Antibiotics are only effective when given to treat bacterial infections.
Complications from colds:

Colds can lead to secondary infections, including bacterial middle ear and sinus infections that may require treatment with antibiotics. When a cold is accompanied by high fever, sinus pain, significantly swollen glands, or a mucus-producing cough, a complication may be present that requires additional treatment.

Cold weather and colds:

Contrary to popular belief, cold weather or getting chilled does not cause a cold, according to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID). However, more colds do occur during the cold season (early fall to late winter), which is probably due to a variety of factors, including:

- schools are in session, increasing the risk for exposure to the virus
- people stay more indoors and are in closer proximity to each other
- low humidity, causing dry nasal passages which are more susceptible to cold viruses

Aspirin and the risk of Reye syndrome in children

Do not give aspirin to a child who has fever without first contacting the child's physician. Aspirin, when given as treatment for viral illnesses in children, has been associated with Reye syndrome, a potentially serious or deadly disorder in children. Therefore, pediatricians and other healthcare providers recommend that aspirin (or any medication that contains aspirin) not be used to treat any viral illnesses (such as colds, the flu, and chickenpox) in children.