



# Managing the Common Cold



AMERICAN  
COLLEGE  
HEALTH  
ASSOCIATION

**The common cold got its name from how frequently people get these kinds of infections. It's estimated that school-aged children get between three and eight colds a year. Thankfully, once you reach college age, you don't get quite this many.**

**Infections like colds are caused by viruses—in fact, there are more than 200 known viruses that cause these infections. The viruses attach to the cells that line the nose and throat and then multiply, causing the familiar symptoms. Some cold viruses attach to the cells in your lower respiratory tract and cause coughs as well as runny noses and sore throats.**

**Influenza (flu) is a particular type of virus that causes more severe illness than the common cold. Many people choose to prevent acquiring this illness by getting the flu vaccine each year.**

## Method of Spreading

- Colds may be spread through coughing or sneezing.
- Colds are also spread hand-to-hand. If you shake, touch, or hold the hand of an infected person (who may not have apparent symptoms) and then touch your eyes or nose, you are more likely to infect yourself with the virus.
- In addition, you can “catch” a cold if you touch your eyes or nose after touching a hard, nonporous surface—such as a telephone or a doorknob—shortly after an infected person touched it.

## Symptoms

The aches and pains that we usually call a cold are really signs that the body is fighting the infection. These signs and symptoms can include:

- Sore throat
- Sneezing
- Runny nose (including nasal discharge that might be thick, opaque, or discolored—this discharge is part of the common cold unless it lasts more than 10 to 14 days)
- Red eyes (conjunctivitis or pinkeye)
- Muscle aches
- Low grade fever
- Headache
- Loss of appetite

These symptoms usually last from two to seven days. A cough may last longer than this, but as the illness improves, the cough is usually dry and the fever has gone away.

## Medication Tips

Since most infections are viral (not bacterial), antibiotics won't make you better.

Treatment is directed at the symptoms causing you the most distress:

- Take ibuprofen or acetaminophen for the fever, sore throat, and muscle aches. Be sure to carefully check labels on all nonprescription products before using two or more products at the same time. Taking products with the same active ingredients together can cause an overdose.
- Antihistamine (like diphenhydramine) can ease the congestion, especially mucus dripping down your throat, and help you sleep—it works especially well at night.
- Cough medicine with guaifenesin (expectorant) or dextromethorphan (cough suppressant) may also be helpful.

## Self-Help Tips

- Eating soup and drinking hot or cold liquids often eases nasal congestion by loosening secretions. They may also make your throat feel better.
- Taking a long, hot shower may help relieve your congestion and cough.
- If you develop conjunctivitis, you can wash your eyes with water or add a little soap (such as tear-free baby shampoo) to get crusts off your eyelids. If you wear eye makeup, you should stop while you have pinkeye and throw your old eye makeup out so you don't re-infect yourself once you're better.
- Be sure to wash your hands frequently so you don't transmit your infection to your friends and roommates.
- Taking vitamin C has not been proven to be beneficial, but drinking juices helps with your hydration.
- Getting plenty of rest will help give your body time to recover.

## When to Seek Help

- If you have a high or persistent fever.
- If you have asthma or smoke cigarettes and are coughing up green phlegm.
- If you have a severe headache.
- If you can't hold down your liquids.
- If you just aren't getting better after a period of time.

**American College Health Association**

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