

# Viral Respiratory Illness in Adults (Common Colds)

The common cold, technically known as an upper respiratory infection, is something that virtually all of us experience at some point. On average, adults get two to three colds a year.

Rhinoviruses cause most colds. More than a hundred different strains of this virus can make you sick.

*“A cold is a viral infection that is spread by air droplets and touch. So, for example if somebody was coughing, they covered their mouth and then touched a doorknob and you came through the same room and touched that doorknob and then touched your face, you’ve now been exposed to the cold. When they’re coughing, they don’t cover their mouth and you’re in the same room and you breathe in those droplets, then you’ve been exposed to the cold.”*

Colds often begin with a sore throat, followed by a stuffy or runny nose and sneezing, and then a cough. These symptoms which are caused by the body’s efforts to fight the cold virus typically go away on their own after seven to 10 days.

There’s no cure for the common cold, but some treatments may help relieve symptoms. These include over-the-counter pain relievers like Acetaminophen, Ibuprofen, or Aspirin; Decongestants, either in pill form or nasal sprays, open a clogged nose. But using sprays for more than 3 days may make congestion worse. And Antihistamines block a substance that causes congestion. They can help in the first day or two of a cold, but some can make you sleepy.

Check with your provider to make sure these medicines are safe for you if you take prescription medications or have an underlying condition. And always follow instructions on the package. Some treatments are best avoided.

*“There’s little evidence that over-the-counter cough medicines are effective. And antibiotics are not effective against viruses, so they shouldn’t be prescribed for a cold.”*

Similarly, alternative treatments like Vitamin C and Echinacea have not been proven effective against colds. Instead, focus on getting plenty of fluids and adequate sleep. And avoid spreading your germs by washing your hands frequently with soap and water. Cover your nose and mouth when you sneeze or cough – ideally into a tissue or your upper shirt sleeve rather than your hands.

You’re most contagious in the two to four days after your symptoms start, which is often when you feel the worst.

*“If your symptoms of a cold don’t improve within a week or two or your symptoms start getting worse - you start having a fever great than 102, if you start having difficulty breathing, pain in your chest, those are reasons to be seen by your physician to be reevaluated for something more serious.”*