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Patient information: The common cold in adults (Beyond the Basics)

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COMMON COLD OVERVIEW

The common cold is one of the most frequent illnesses in the United States. Although most colds are mild and resolve within a short time period, colds cost billions of dollars per year, mostly due to lost time at work and school.

This article discusses the common cold in adults. Colds in children are discussed separately. (See "[Patient information: The common cold in children \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)

COMMON COLD CAUSES

The common cold is a group of symptoms caused by one of a large number of viruses. Rhinoviruses cause the greatest number of colds; there are more than 100 different varieties of rhinovirus. Most viruses cause a person to be ill only once. However, due to the large number of viruses, a person can have a cold multiple times throughout his or her lifetime. The average adult experiences two to three colds per year, while children average 8 to 12 colds per year. (See "[Patient information: The common cold in children \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)

Colds are transmitted from person-to-person. Less often, the virus can be transmitted by touching a surface.

Direct contact — People with colds typically carry the cold virus on their hands. The virus may remain alive on the skin and capable of infecting another person for at least two hours. Thus, if a sick person shakes someone's hand and that individual then touches his eye, nose, or mouth, the virus can be transmitted and later infect that person.

Infection from particles on surfaces — Some cold viruses can live on surfaces (such as a counter top, door handle, or phone) for several hours.

Inhaling viral particles — Droplets containing viral particles can be breathed, coughed, or sneezed into the air by a person with a cold. The virus can be transmitted to others if another person is standing close (a few feet) and the droplet touches that person's eye, nose, or mouth. Covering the mouth while coughing or sneezing reduces this risk. (See '[Prevention](#)' below.)

Most cold viruses are **not** spread by saliva. Thus, kissing itself is not likely to transmit the common cold, but close direct contact can. Colds are **not** caused by cold climates or being exposed to cold air. However, some types of virus cause more colds during certain seasons (eg, fall and winter versus spring).

COMMON COLD SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

The common cold usually causes nasal congestion, runny nose, and sneezing. A sore throat may be present on the first day but usually resolves quickly. If a cough occurs, it generally develops on about the fourth or fifth day of symptoms, typically when congestion and runny nose are usually resolving. (See ["Patient information: Sore throat in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)"](#).)

COMMON COLD COMPLICATIONS

In most cases, colds do not cause serious illness. Most colds last for three to seven days, although many people continue to have symptoms (coughing, sneezing, congestion) for up to two weeks.

Some viruses that cause the common cold can also depress the immune system or cause swelling in the lining of the nose or airways; this can, in turn, lead to a new viral infection or bacterial infection.

- One of the more common complications is sinusitis, which is usually caused by viruses and rarely (about 2 percent of the time) by bacteria. However, it can be difficult to distinguish bacterial sinusitis from sinusitis caused by a cold because the signs and symptoms can be similar ([table 1](#)). Having thick or yellow to green-colored nasal discharge does not mean that bacterial sinusitis has developed; discolored nasal discharge is a normal phase of the common cold. (See ["Patient information: Acute sinusitis \(sinus infection\) \(Beyond the Basics\)"](#).)
- Lower respiratory infections, such as pneumonia or bronchitis, may develop following a cold. (See ["Patient information: Acute bronchitis in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)"](#) and ["Patient information: Pneumonia in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)"](#).)
- Infection of the middle ear, or otitis media, can accompany or follow a cold. (See ["Patient information: Ear infections \(otitis media\) in children \(Beyond the Basics\)"](#).)
- The influenza virus, which causes the flu, can also cause features similar to those of a cold ([table 2](#)). However, the flu usually causes other signs and symptoms (fever, body aches) and is more serious than a cold. (See ["Patient information: Influenza symptoms and treatment \(Beyond the Basics\)"](#).)

COMMON COLD TREATMENT

There is no specific treatment for the viruses that cause the common cold. Most treatments are aimed at relieving some of the symptoms of the cold, but do not shorten or cure the cold. Antibiotics are **not** useful for treating the common cold; antibiotics are only used to treat illnesses caused by bacteria, not viruses.

The symptoms of a cold will resolve over time, even without any treatment. The following are treatments that may reduce the symptoms caused by the common cold. People with underlying medical conditions and those who use other over-the-counter or prescription medications should speak with their healthcare provider or pharmacist to ensure that it is safe to use these treatments.

Runny nose and nasal congestion — Runny nose and congestion may improve with the use of decongestants. Pseudoephedrine is a decongestant that can improve nasal congestion. Most drugstores in the United States carry pseudoephedrine behind the counter, so it must be requested from the pharmacist (a prescription is not required).

