

Self-care information on...

# Coughs and Colds



## What is a cough?

A cough is a reflex action to clear your airways of mucus and irritants such as dust or smoke. A cough will usually clear up on its own within two weeks.

A cough may be dry or chesty:

- |               |  |
|---------------|--|
| Dry coughs    | - usually felt in the throat as a tickle that sets off the coughing.<br>- are non-productive, which means that phlegm (thick mucus) is not produced. |
| Chesty coughs | - are productive, which means that phlegm is produced.<br>- are helpful as they help clear the phlegm from your lung passages.                       |

## What causes a cough?

Most coughs are caused by viral infections.

## What is a cold?

A cold is an infection of the nose and upper airways. In adults and older children, the cold will usually last for about a week.

## What causes a cold?

Colds are caused by a virus.

## **What are the symptoms of a cold?**

- Runny nose, beginning with clear mucus that develops into thicker, green mucus as the cold progresses
- Blocked nose
- Sore throat
- Sneezing
- Cough

People with a cold may also suffer with a mild fever, earache, tiredness and headache. Symptoms develop over one or two days and gradually get better after a few days. Some colds can last for up to two weeks.

## **How to treat coughs and colds**

Coughs and colds usually get better by themselves without any treatment.

**Antibiotics are not effective in treating a cold or the majority of coughs.**

### **Self care**

In most cases, you will be able to treat the symptoms of a cold yourself at home by doing the following:

- Drink plenty of fluids to replace any fluids you may have lost due to sweating and having a runny nose
- Get plenty of rest
- Eat healthily: a low-fat, high-fibre diet is recommended, including plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables

Many children will lose their appetite when they have a cold. However, this is perfectly normal and it should only last for a few days. It is recommended that children with a cold only eat when they are hungry.

### **Cough and cold medicines**

There is little evidence that cough and cold medicines work. Some of the ingredients may help to treat some cold symptoms, such as a blocked nose or fever.

Cough and cold medicines should never be taken for more than two weeks. The majority of cough and cold medicines should not be given to children under the age of six. Your local pharmacist will be able to advise you on which medicine is most suitable for you or your child.

- **Hydration**

Make sure you keep well hydrated by drinking plenty of fluids.

- **Nasal saline drops**

Nasal saline drops or sprays can help relieve the symptoms of nasal congestion in babies and young children.

- **Steam inhalation**

Breathing in steam may help to ease congestion by loosening mucus and making it easier to clear by blowing your nose. Steam inhalation involves sitting with your head over a bowl of hot water. Place a towel over your head, close your eyes and breathe deeply. Avoid getting the hot steam in your eyes. Adding menthol or eucalyptus to the water may help to clear the passageways in your nose.

Steam inhalation is not advised for children due to the risk of scalding. Instead, a child may benefit from sitting in a hot, steamy bathroom.

- **Painkillers**

Paracetamol, ibuprofen or aspirin can help to reduce a fever. They also act as painkillers. Always follow the manufacturer's instructions to ensure that the correct dose is given. Aspirin should not be taken by children who are under 16 years old. Some cough and cold medicines contain painkillers. It is important that you do not take more than the recommended dosage of painkillers.

- **Cough medicines**

There is little evidence that cough medicines work. If you want a cough medicine, a simple remedy containing honey and lemon can be made at home or bought from supermarkets or pharmacies. Your pharmacist will be able to advise you on which medicine is most suitable for you or your child.

- **Decongestants**

Decongestants are medications that reduce nasal congestion (blocked or stuffy nose). They work by reducing the swelling in the passageways of your nose.

Check with your pharmacist before using a decongestant if you take any other medication. Decongestants should not be used for more than five to seven days because overuse can make the symptoms of congestion worse.

## When to contact your GP practice

- If symptoms persist for more than 14 days
- You or your child have a high temperature (fever)
- If your child is vomiting but does not have diarrhoea, or has a rash in addition to the fever
- If your child stops drinking and is unusually lethargic
- If you cough up blood-stained phlegm (thick mucus)
- If you develop chest pain
- If you develop difficulty breathing
- If you have severe swelling of your lymph nodes (glands) in your neck and/or armpits
- Cough is getting progressively worse
- Pre-existing lung condition such as asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)

### CATCH IT



Germs spread easily. Always carry tissues and use them to catch your cough or sneeze.

### BIN IT



Germs can live for several hours on tissues. Dispose of your tissue as soon as possible.

### KILL IT



Hands can transfer germs to every surface you touch. Clean your hands as soon as you can.

If you need any further information:

- Ask your pharmacist
- NHS choices: [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)
- Patient UK [www.patient.co.uk](http://www.patient.co.uk)

