

# The Common Cold

## How can I tell if I have a cold or the flu?

A cold and the flu cause many of the same symptoms. But a cold is generally mild, while the flu tends to be more severe.

A cold often starts with feeling tired, sneezing, coughing and having a runny nose. You may not have a fever or you may run a low fever--just 1 or 2 degrees higher than usual. You may also have muscle aches, a scratchy or sore throat, watery eyes and a headache.

The flu starts suddenly and hits hard. You'll probably feel weak and tired, and have a fever, dry cough, a runny nose, chills, muscle aches, severe headache, eye pain and a sore throat. It usually takes longer to get over the flu than a cold

## What causes colds and the flu?

Viruses. Over 100 different viruses can cause colds. There aren't as many viruses that cause the flu. That's why there's a shot for the flu and not for colds.

## What can I do to feel better?

There's no cure for a cold or the flu. Antibiotics don't work against viruses. All you can do to feel better is treat your symptoms while your body fights off the virus (see below).

## Ways to treat your cold/flu symptoms:

- Stay home and rest, especially while you have a fever.
- Stop smoking and avoid secondhand smoke, which can make cold symptoms worse.
- Drink plenty of fluids like water, fruit juices and clear soups. Fluids help loosen mucus. Fluids are also important if you have a fever because fever can dry up your body's fluids, which can lead to dehydration.
- Don't drink alcohol.
- Gargle with warm salt water a few times a day to relieve a sore throat. Throat sprays or lozenges may also help relieve the pain.
- Use saline (salt water) nose drops to help loosen mucus and moisten the tender skin in your nose.
- Take acetaminophen 500mg, 2 tablets every 6 hours, and/or ibuprofen 200mg, 2-3 tablets every 6 hours, as needed for fever and pain control.
- Use a humidifier in your bedroom or other rooms you spend lots of time in.
- Use steam inhalations (run hot water in the shower or bathroom)

## Should I take medicine for a cold or the flu?

No medicine can cure a cold or the flu. Medicine can, however, help relieve some of your cold or flu symptoms. Check with your doctor before giving any medicine to children.

Many cold/flu products are available without a prescription. See below for a guide to the common ingredients in these products.

## What's in over-the-counter cold/flu medicines?

The ingredients listed below are found in many cold/flu medicines. Read labels carefully. If you have questions, talk to your doctor or pharmacist.

- **Analgesics** relieve aches and pains and reduce fever. Examples: acetaminophen, aspirin, ibuprofen, ketoprofen, naproxen. Warning: Children and teenagers shouldn't be given aspirin.
- **Antitussives** tell your brain to stop coughing. Don't take an antitussive if you're coughing up mucus. Example: dextromethorphan.
- **Expectorants** help thin mucus so it can be coughed up more easily. Example: guaifenesin.
- **Oral decongestant** shrinks the nasal passages and reduce congestion. Examples: ephedrine, pseudoephedrine.

## What about prescription medicines for the flu?

Some prescription medicines can relieve flu symptoms. These medicines may help reduce the severity of symptoms if they are started soon after you begin to get sick.

## Should I call my clinician?

In most cases, you don't need to see your clinician when you have a cold or the flu. However, if you have any of the symptoms in the box below, call your clinician.

- High (above 102 F) or prolonged fever
- A cold that lasts for more than 10 days
- Trouble breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in the chest
- Fainting or feeling like you are about to faint
- Confusion or disorientation
- Severe or persistent vomiting
- Severe pain in your face or forehead
- Hoarseness, sore throat or a cough that won't go away