

Overview

With so many symptoms in common, it can be hard to tell the difference between a cold and the flu. Here's how to tell which is which.

What is the common cold?

A cold is a contagious upper respiratory infection that affects your nose, throat, sinuses and windpipe (trachea). You may have heard that the common cold is a coronavirus. In fact, more than 200 different types of viruses can cause a cold. The most common cold virus is the rhinovirus.

We call colds "common" because as their name implies, they're widespread. You'll probably have more colds in your lifetime than any other illness. Adults catch two to three colds a year, while young children come down with a cold four or more times a year.

Symptoms and Causes

Early symptoms of the common cold include sore throat, runny nose and coughing.

What are the symptoms of the common cold?

Common cold symptoms typically appear in stages. The common cold stages include early, active and late.

Stage 1: Early (Days 1 to 3)

Within one to three days of picking up a cold virus, you may notice a tickle in your throat. About half of all people with colds report a tickly or sore throat as their first symptom. Other common cold symptoms you may experience during this early stage include:

- Sneezing.
- Runny nose.
- Stuffy nose (nasal congestion).
- Cough.
- Hoarseness.

Stage 2: Active (Days 4 to 7)

Symptoms typically worsen or peak during this stage. In addition to the symptoms in stage 1, you may experience:

- Body aches.
- Headache.
- Runny eyes and nose.
- Fatigue.
- Fever (more common in children).

Stage 3: Late (Days 8 to 10)

Colds usually begin to wind down during this stage. You may be free and clear at this point. But some symptoms can persist. Some people develop a nagging cough that can last up to two months after a respiratory infection.

If your symptoms get worse and/or your fever returns, make a trip to a healthcare provider. You may have developed another infection or a complication, such as bronchitis, sinusitis or pneumonia.

What are the symptoms of the common cold in babies?

Symptoms of colds in babies may include:

- Runny nose (the discharge may start clear; later, it becomes thicker and may be gray, yellow or green).
- Sneezing.
- Fever of 101 to 102 degrees Fahrenheit (38.3 to 38.9 degrees Celsius).
- Loss of appetite.
- Increased drooling because of sore throat and difficulty swallowing.
- Cough.
- Irritability.
- Slightly swollen glands.

How do cold symptoms differ from more severe infections in babies and children?

If your child has any of the following symptoms, call their healthcare provider. These symptoms could mean that your child has something more serious than a cold:

- Fever in an infant 2 months or younger.
- Difficulty breathing (especially if your baby's or child's nostrils widen with each breath).
- Fast or labored breathing.
- Wheezing.
- Ribs showing with each breath.
- Blue lips.
- Not eating or drinking, which could mean dehydration.
- Ear pain.
- Excessive crankiness or sleepiness.

- A cough that lasts more than 3 weeks.
- Your baby seems to be getting sicker.

What causes the common cold?

Rhinoviruses cause up to 50% of common colds. There are more than 100 different rhinoviruses. But other types of viruses, such as coronaviruses, can also cause colds. More than 200 different viruses can cause a cold.

Is the common cold contagious?

Yes. Colds spread easily from person to person. For you to become infected, the virus has to get to one of your mucous membranes — the moist lining of your nostrils, eyes or mouth. That happens when you touch a surface or breathe moist air that contains the cold virus.

For example, when a person who's sick sneezes or coughs, they launch droplets of fluid containing the cold virus into the air. If you breathe in those droplets, the cold virus takes root in your nose. You can also leave virus particles on surfaces you touch when you're sick. If someone else touches those surfaces and then touches their nostrils, eyes or mouth, the virus can get in.

How long is the common cold contagious?

You can be contagious for up to two weeks, even spreading a cold a day or two before you have symptoms. But you're most contagious when your symptoms are at their worst — usually the first three days you feel sick.

What is the common cold incubation period?

The incubation period is the time between when you're infected and when your symptoms first appear. The common cold incubation period is between 12 hours and three days after exposure to the virus.

Why do children and babies get more colds?

The common cold in children and babies occurs more often because they haven't been exposed to as many viruses as adults. Their immune systems have to learn how to recognize and fight new germs.

Before turning 2 years old, a baby can get as many as eight to 10 colds a year. By the time you become an adult, you've had many colds. It's easier for your immune system to identify and attack similar viruses.

In addition, children are in close contact with other children. Kids typically don't cover their coughs and sneezes or [wash their hands](#) before touching their faces — steps that prevent the virus from spreading.

Cold viruses can live on objects for several hours. Babies often pick up objects that other babies have touched. If a baby touches something that has cold germs on it, then touches their mouth, eyes or nose, the germs can infect them.

Diagnosis and Tests

How is the common cold diagnosed?

A healthcare provider will ask you about your symptoms and perform a physical exam. During the exam, the provider will check for signs, such as:

- Swelling in your nostrils.
- A stuffy nose.
- A red, irritated throat.
- Swollen lymph nodes in your neck.
- Clear lungs.

What tests will be done to diagnose the common cold?

Typically, a physical exam is enough to determine if you have a cold. You may need tests if the provider suspects you have COVID-19, the flu or another condition. The provider may give you a nasal swab test (cotton swab rubbed inside your nose) to check for these viruses. Chest X-rays can rule out other conditions, such as bronchitis or pneumonia.

Management and Treatment

How is the common cold treated?

There's no cure for a cold. You have to let it run its course. Most colds go away on their own within seven to 10 days and don't turn into anything more serious. Common cold treatment includes over-the-counter (OTC) medications to help reduce your symptoms and keep you comfortable until you recover.

Why can't antibiotics cure a cold?

Antibiotics are medications that fight infections caused by bacteria. Because viruses cause colds, antibiotics don't work for colds. Sometimes, children may develop complications from bacteria, such as an ear infection or pneumonia. Healthcare providers may prescribe antibiotics to treat these illnesses.

What cold medicines relieve symptoms?

There are many OTC common cold medication options available to treat your symptoms. But some of these medications aren't safe for children. Check with a healthcare provider before giving your child OTC medications. Be careful not to combine medicines that treat multiple symptoms. You could get too much of some ingredients, which could cause other health problems, including organ damage.

Medications that may relieve cold symptoms include:

- Pain relievers: Acetaminophen (Tylenol®) and NSAIDs such as ibuprofen (Advil®) may relieve headaches and fever.
- Decongestants: You can use medications like pseudoephedrine (Contac Cold 12 Hour® and Sudafed®).
- Antihistamines: Diphenhydramine (Benadryl®) and other antihistamines may stop sneezing and a runny nose.
- Cough suppressants: Medications such as dextromethorphan (Robitussin® and Vicks DayQuil Cough®) and codeine can help reduce coughing. Providers don't routinely recommend these for children under 5 years of age.
- Expectorants: Guaifenesin (Mucinex®) and other expectorants may help thin and loosen mucus.

How are common colds in babies treated?

Unless prescribed by their provider, don't give your baby any over-the-counter cough or cold medicines. To treat common cold in babies:

- Keep your baby comfortable.
- Give your baby fluids. For babies 6 months or younger, let them drink breast milk or formula. At 6 months, your baby can also have some water.
- Let your baby get plenty of rest.

Since most children can't blow their nose until about age 4, the following methods may help ease your baby's stuffy nose:

- Saline and suction: About 15 minutes before a feeding, use over-the-counter saline (salt water) drops to loosen up the mucus in your baby's nostrils. Suction out the liquid and mucus a few minutes later with a rubber bulb or oral suction device. This will clear the mucus out of your baby's nose and allow them to breathe and suck at the same time.
- Petroleum jelly: Dab petroleum jelly on the outside of your baby's nostrils to reduce irritation. Don't block the inside of your baby's nostrils. (Unless their provider recommends it, don't use nasal sprays on your baby. They may work for a bit but will make their congestion worse with continued use.)

- **Humidifier or vaporizer:** Moisten the air in your baby's room with a humidifier or vaporizer. The clean, cool mist will help moisten the air and decrease the drying of your baby's nasal passages and throat. Clean and dry the humidifier thoroughly before using it to get rid of bacteria or mold that may have collected in the device. Ensure you have the appropriate filter, and check if it needs to be replaced. Don't use hot water vaporizers because of the risk of burns.
- **Steam:** If you don't have a humidifier, take your baby into a steamy room such as a bathroom. Turn on the hot water, close the door and sit together in the steamy room for about 15 minutes. Don't leave your baby alone in the room. Be safe around water. Giving your baby a warm bath may also work.

Babies can continue their normal activities if they seem well enough to do so. If they have a fever or complications, it's best to keep them at home.

Prevention

Can the common cold be prevented?

There are several steps you can take to prevent a cold, including:

- **Washing your hands:** Wash your hands frequently, especially before eating or preparing food. Also, wash your hands after using the bathroom, wiping your nose or coming into contact with someone who has a cold.
- **Avoiding touching your face:** Cold viruses spread from your hands to your eyes, nose and mouth.
- **Cleaning frequently used surfaces:** Viruses can live on doorknobs and other places people often touch.
- **Using hand sanitizers:** When you can't wash your hands with soap and water, use alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- **Strengthening your immune system:** Get enough sleep, eat a healthy diet and exercise so your body is ready to fight off germs.
- **Staying home:** To make sure you don't spread the cold to others, stay home when you're sick.

How can colds in babies be prevented?

The best way to prevent your baby from catching a cold is to keep them away from people who have colds. If possible, keep your baby home. A virus that causes a mild illness in an older child or an adult can cause a more serious one in an infant.

Hand washing is the most important way to reduce the spread of colds:

- Adults who have contact with babies and young children should wash their hands after coughing, sneezing or wiping their nose.

- Wash your hands after touching someone who has a cold.
- After wiping your baby's nose, wash your hands and your baby's hands.
- Clean toys regularly and avoid sharing toys that babies place in their mouths.
- If soap and water aren't available, use pre-moistened hand wipes or hand sanitizers. (Be sure to keep hand sanitizers away from children. They may be harmful if swallowed.)

Keep your baby up-to-date on all of the recommended immunizations. They won't stop colds, but they can help prevent some complications, such as bacterial infections of their ears or lungs.

Pediatricians recommend the flu (influenza) vaccine each year for babies who are at least 6 months old. The shot protects against the flu but not against other respiratory viruses. The COVID-19 immunization is available as well for infants starting at 6 months of age.

Outlook / Prognosis

How long does a common cold last?

Most colds go away on their own within seven to 10 days. Most people recover quickly and the common cold doesn't lead to anything more serious.

Can a cold kill you?

The common cold isn't fatal. In some people — especially those with weakened immune systems — a cold could lead to other conditions that could cause severe health problems. Those complications include:

- Asthma.
- Sinus infections.
- Ear infections.

Living With

What are the best common cold remedies?

You may have heard that supplements and herbal remedies, such as zinc, vitamin C and echinacea can treat and prevent colds.

Researchers haven't found that any of those remedies can prevent colds. But zinc may shorten the illness and reduce symptoms. However, it may cause permanent loss of smell, especially when you use it in nasal sprays.

The best common cold self-care remedy is to get plenty of rest. Consider taking time off from work or school for at least the first few days of illness. Not only will you have more time to rest, but you'll avoid spreading germs to others.

Also, make sure you're drinking plenty of fluids to keep your nose and throat moist. Avoid alcohol and caffeine because they have a drying effect.

When should I see a healthcare provider for the common cold?

Contact a healthcare provider if you have any of the following symptoms:

- High fever.
- Chest pain.
- Ear pain.
- Asthma flare-up or difficulty breathing.
- Symptoms lasting more than 10 days or getting worse.

When should my baby see their provider for the common cold?

Call your baby's healthcare provider or go to the nearest emergency room if your baby:

- Develops a high fever.
- Stops eating.
- Is vomiting.
- Has ear or stomach pain.
- Cries more than usual.
- Is sleepier than usual.
- Starts wheezing.
- Has trouble breathing.

Additional Common Questions

Does having a cold affect pregnancy?

Having a cold during pregnancy isn't usually dangerous. But you do need to be careful with what cold medications you take to treat symptoms. Your healthcare provider can let you know which ones are safe to use during pregnancy.

If you think you may have the flu or you develop a fever, you should contact your provider right away. You may need immediate treatment.

Why do colds occur in the winter?

You can catch a cold any time of year, but it's more likely during colder months. In winter, people stay indoors and are in closer contact with each other.

A recent study in mice suggests cold temperatures may also affect your immune system's response. Researchers found that when cooler air lowered nose temperature, mouse immune systems had a harder time stopping the rhinovirus from multiplying. The same may be true in humans.

Common cold vs. Covid — what's the difference?

Coronaviruses are a group of viruses that can cause upper respiratory infections. While rhinoviruses cause most types of common cold, coronaviruses do cause some. Most people recover quickly from these common colds.

Coronaviruses may also travel into your lungs and lead to pneumonia and other complications that can be fatal. The novel (new) coronavirus discovered in 2019 causes a specific disease known as COVID-19. Early symptoms that make COVID-19 different from the common cold include:

- Fever.
- Chills and shaking.
- Shortness of breath (dyspnea).
- Loss of taste or smell (anosmia).
- Diarrhea.

However, the omicron variant of COVID-19 causes slightly milder symptoms, making it easier to confuse with a cold. Omicron symptoms similar to the common cold include:

- Runny nose.
- Cough.
- Sore throat.
- Headache.
- Nasal congestion.

Common cold vs. flu — what's the difference?

It can be hard to tell whether you have a cold or the flu since many of the symptoms are the same. Both are widespread during the colder months and affect your upper respiratory system. But different viruses cause cold and flu. The flu comes from the influenza virus, while many other types of viruses cause colds.

The main difference between cold and flu is that you're more likely to have a fever and chills with flu. Adults don't usually get a fever with a common cold, although kids sometimes do.

The [flu](#) also causes body aches and more severe symptoms than a cold. Although both the cold and flu can lead to complications, flu complications can be life-threatening.

Common cold vs. chest cold — what's the difference?

A chest cold, or short-term (acute) bronchitis, causes irritation and a buildup of mucus in your lungs. Common colds turn into chest colds when the virus travels from your nose and throat to your lungs. Occasionally, bacteria cause chest colds.

You can have a cough with a common cold or a chest cold. But chest colds produce a wet cough, meaning you may feel or cough up phlegm. You may also have:

- A cough that keeps you up all night.
- Shortness of breath.
- A sore chest.