

An **Upper Respiratory Infection (URI)** is an illness caused by viruses or bacteria that affect the upper part of your respiratory system, specifically above your vocal cords. This area includes your nose, sinuses, throat (pharynx), and voice box (larynx). Common examples of URIs are **colds, strep throat, and sinus infections**.

While most URIs are caused by **viruses**, such as the common cold viruses, influenza (flu), SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19), and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), they can also be caused by **bacteria** or even fungi.

Symptoms of upper respiratory infections vary depending on the cause and the specific part of your body affected. They can include:

- Fever
- **Sore throat**
- Cough
- **Runny or stuffy nose**
- Sneezing
- Hoarse voice or loss of voice
- Fatigue
- Facial pain
- **Wheezing**
- Swollen lymph nodes

URIs caused by viruses and bacteria are **contagious**. They spread through respiratory droplets released when someone coughs, sneezes, or talks, by sharing eating or drinking utensils, or through contact with contaminated objects or surfaces. Fungal URIs are not contagious. Viral URIs are typically most contagious in the first few days of symptoms, and sometimes even a day or two before symptoms start. You might still be contagious even as you begin to feel better, especially if symptoms persist. Untreated strep throat can remain contagious for weeks.

Healthcare providers usually diagnose URIs based on your symptoms and may use a nasal swab or throat culture, particularly if they suspect infections like the flu or strep throat. Colds, caused by hundreds of viruses, are often not specifically tested for.

**Treatment depends on the cause.** There are no specific treatments for most viral URIs, like colds; they generally have to **run their course**, typically lasting one to two weeks. You can ease symptoms during recovery by drinking plenty of water and using over-the-counter medications. **Antibiotics do not work on viruses.** Bacterial infections, such as strep throat, are treated with antibiotics, and symptoms should begin to improve a day or two after starting treatment. It is crucial to complete the entire course of antibiotics as prescribed, even if you feel better.

While colds rarely lead to complications, URIs can sometimes cause inflammation in the lungs, potentially leading to pneumonia. If bacterial or fungal infections are not treated, they can spread to other parts of the body and cause serious conditions like meningitis, rheumatic fever, scarlet fever, sepsis, or organ damage. Certain individuals are at higher risk for

complications, including those over 65, people with compromised immune systems, those with other health conditions, and newborns.

You can reduce your risk of getting or spreading upper respiratory infections by getting recommended vaccinations, **washing your hands frequently**, disinfecting surfaces, not sharing food, utensils, or cups, and wearing a mask if you are sick and need to be around others.

Most upper respiratory infections are not serious. However, you should **contact a healthcare provider** if your symptoms are severe, last longer than two weeks, or return frequently, as this could indicate a bacterial or fungal infection or another health condition. You should go to the **emergency room immediately** if you experience signs of severe illness, including a **high fever (over 103 degrees Fahrenheit / 40 degrees Celsius)**, difficulty breathing, chest pain, noisy breathing like wheezing or stridor, dizziness, confusion or other mental changes, or retractions (when the skin between your ribs pulls in as you breathe).