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Common cold

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The common cold is an illness affecting your nose and throat. Most often, it's harmless, but it might not feel that way. Germs called viruses cause a common cold.

Often, adults may have two or three colds each year. Infants and young children may have colds more often.

Most people recover from a common cold in 7 to 10 days. Symptoms might last longer in people who smoke. Most often, you don't need medical care for a common cold. If symptoms don't get better or if they get worse, see your health care provider.

Illnesses of the nose and throat caused by germs are called upper respiratory tract infections.



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Symptoms

Most often, common cold symptoms start 1 to 3 days after someone is exposed to a cold virus. Symptoms vary. They can include:

- Runny or stuffy nose.
- Sore or scratchy throat.
- Cough.
- Sneezing.
- Generally feeling unwell.
- Slight body aches or a mild headache.
- Low-grade fever.

The mucus from your nose may start out clear and become thicker and yellow or green. This change is normal. Most often, it doesn't mean that you have a bacterial illness.

When to see a doctor

For adults. Most often, you don't need medical care for a common cold. But see your health care provider if you have:

- Symptoms that get worse or do not get better.
- Fever greater than 101.3 degrees Fahrenheit (38.5 degrees Celsius) that lasts more than three days.

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- Fever returning after a fever-free period.
- Shortness of breath.
- Wheezing.
- Intense sore throat, headache or sinus pain.

For children. Most children with a common cold don't need to see a health care provider. Get medical care right away if your child has any of the following:

- Fever of 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius) in newborns up to 12 weeks.
- Rising fever or fever lasting more than two days in a child of any age.
- More-intense symptoms, such as headache, throat pain or cough.
- Trouble with breathing or wheezing.
- Ear pain.
- Fussiness or drowsiness that isn't typical.
- No interest in eating.

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Causes

Many viruses can cause a common cold. Rhinoviruses are the most common cause.

A cold virus enters the body through the mouth, eyes or nose. The virus can spread by:

- Droplets in the air when someone who is sick coughs, sneezes or talks.
- Hand-to-hand contact with someone who has a cold.
- Sharing objects with the virus on them, such as dishes, towels, toys or telephones.
- Touching your eyes, nose or mouth after contact with the virus.

Risk factors

These factors can increase the chances of getting a cold:

- **Age.** Infants and young children have a greater risk of colds than other people, especially if they spend time in child care settings.
- **Weakened immune system.** Having a long-term illness or weakened immune system increases your risk.
- **Time of year.** Both children and adults are more likely to get colds in fall and winter.
- **Smoking.** Smoking or being around secondhand smoke increases the risk.

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- **Smoking.** Smoking or being around secondhand smoke increases the risk of catching a cold.
- **Exposure.** Being in crowds, such as at school or on an airplane, increases the chance of getting a cold.

Complications

These conditions can occur along with your cold:

- **Middle ear infection.** This is the swelling and build-up of fluids in the space behind the eardrum. It may be caused by a virus or bacteria. Typical signs and symptoms include earaches or the return of a fever following a common cold.
- **Asthma.** A cold can trigger wheezing, even in people who don't have asthma. For people with asthma, a cold can make it worse.
- **Sinusitis.** In adults or children, a common cold that lasts a while can lead to swelling and pain in the sinuses. These are air-filled spaces in the skull above the eyes and around the nose. A virus or bacteria may cause sinusitis.
- **Other illnesses.** A common cold can lead to illnesses of the lungs, such as pneumonia or bronchitis. People with asthma or weakened immune systems have an increased risk of these conditions.

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Prevention

There's no vaccine for the common cold. You can take these steps to slow the spread of the virus and prevent illness:

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- **Wash your hands.** Wash your hands well and often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water aren't available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol. Teach your children the importance of hand-washing. Try not to touch your eyes, nose or mouth with unwashed hands.
- **Clean and disinfect.** Clean and disinfect surfaces that are touched often. These include doorknobs, light switches, electronics, and kitchen and bathroom countertops. This is especially important when someone in your family has a cold. Wash children's toys often.
- **Cover your cough.** Sneeze and cough into tissues. Throw away used tissues right away, and then wash your hands. If you don't have a tissue, sneeze or cough into the bend of your elbow, and then wash your hands.
- **Don't share.** Don't share drinking glasses or silverware with other family members.
- **Stay away from people with colds.** Avoid close contact with anyone who has a cold. Stay out of crowds when possible. Try not to touch your eyes, nose and mouth when you're in crowds.
- **Review your child care center's policies.** Look for a child care setting with good hygiene practices and clear policies about keeping sick children at home.
- **Take care of yourself.** Eat well, exercise and get plenty of sleep to help you stay healthy.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

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