**Upper Respiratory Infection**

An upper respiratory infection affects the upper part of your respiratory system, including your sinuses and throat. Upper respiratory infection symptoms include a runny nose, sore throat and cough. Treatment for upper respiratory infections often includes rest, fluids and over-the-counter pain relievers. Infections usually go away on their own.

* [**APPOINTMENTS**](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/patients/information/access)
* [**CONTACT US**](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/help)

**What is a respiratory infection?**

A respiratory tract infection affects the [respiratory system](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/21205-respiratory-system), the part of your body responsible for breathing. These infections can affect your sinuses, throat, lungs or airways. There are two types of respiratory infections:

* Upper respiratory infections.
* Lower respiratory infections.

**What is an upper respiratory infection?**

These infections affect your sinuses and throat. Upper respiratory infections include:

* Common cold.
* Epiglottitis.
* Laryngitis.
* Pharyngitis (sore throat).
* Sinusitis (sinus infection).

**What is a lower respiratory infection?**

A lower respiratory infection affects the airways and lungs. In general, lower respiratory infections last longer and are more serious. These infections include:

* [Bronchitis](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/3993-bronchitis), a lung infection that causes coughing and fever.
* [Bronchiolitis](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/8272-bronchiolitis), a lung infection that mostly affects young children.
* Chest infection.
* Pneumonia.

**What causes upper respiratory infections?**

You get an upper respiratory infection when a virus (or bacteria) enters your respiratory system. For example, you might touch an infected surface or shake hands with a person who’s sick. You then touch your mouth, nose or eyes. The germs from your hands enter and infect your body.

**Who’s at risk for upper respiratory infections?**

These infections are common, and anyone can catch one. Yet certain groups of people are more at risk of catching infections. Children are at a high risk since they are often with other children who may be carrying a virus. Children may also wash their hands less frequently than adults. Plus, they’re more likely to put their fingers in their eyes, nose and mouth, allowing the germs to spread easily.

People who have heart or lung problems are also at higher risk of getting an upper respiratory infection. Those who have weak immune systems (due to another disease) may get more severe infections.

**How are upper respiratory infections diagnosed?**

Your healthcare provider may diagnose the infection based on a [physical exam](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diagnostics/17366-physical-examination) and your symptoms. They’ll look in your nose, ears and throat and listen to your chest to examine your breathing. You often don’t need other tests.

If your provider is concerned you may have a lung infection or another infection, you may need a:

* [Lung (chest) X-ray](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diagnostics/10228-chest-x-ray).
* Lung [CT scan](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diagnostics/4808-ct-computed-tomography-scan).
* [Lung (pulmonary) function test](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diagnostics/17966-pulmonary-function-testing) to see how your lungs are working.
* Nasal swab.
* Throat swab.
* Sputum test, when you cough up some sputum (phlegm from your lungs) for examination.

**Are upper respiratory infections contagious?**

Yes, upper respiratory infections are contagious. They pass from person to person through respiratory droplets or hand-to-hand contact. People who have an upper respiratory infection can pass it to others through:

* Sneezing or coughing without covering their nose and mouth. This sprays germs into the air. Other people can breathe in those germ-filled droplets.
* Sneezing or coughing into their hand and then touching someone else’s hand. The droplets are now on the other person’s hand. When that person touches their nose, mouth or eyes, the infection enters their body.

**What are the symptoms of upper respiratory infections?**

You may get symptoms, including:

* [Cough](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/symptoms/17755-cough).
* [Fever](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/symptoms/10880-fever).
* Hoarse voice.
* Fatigue and lack of energy.
* Red eyes.
* Runny nose.
* Sore throat.
* [Swollen lymph nodes](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/15219-swollen-lymph-nodes) (swelling on the sides of your neck).

**How long do upper respiratory infections last?**

Upper respiratory infections typically last one to two weeks. Most of the time, they go away on their own. Over-the-counter pain medications can help you feel better. Make sure you drink plenty of fluids to stay hydrated.

If your symptoms last longer than two weeks, talk to your healthcare provider. You may have another condition that is causing the symptoms, such as pneumonia or bronchitis.

**Can antibiotics treat upper respiratory infections?**

Most of the time, viruses cause upper respiratory infections. Viruses don’t respond to [antibiotics](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/drugs/16386-antibiotics). You can most likely treat the symptoms at home through pain relievers, rest and drinking fluids. If you have a bacterial infection, such as strep throat, you’ll take antibiotics. Penicillin or amoxicillin are frequently prescribed for strep throat.

**When should I see a healthcare provider for an upper respiratory infection?**

If you have any of these symptoms, contact your healthcare provider or seek medical help:

* [Loss of consciousness](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/17536-syncope).
* High fever (higher than 103 F).
* Rapid breathing or difficulty breathing.
* Frequent, severe coughing, which may come with vomiting.
* [Wheezing](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/symptoms/15203-wheezing), a high-pitched whistling sound when you breathe out.
* [Dizziness](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/symptoms/6422-dizziness).
* Retractions, when you see a deeper outline of your ribcage or ribs than you normally do. (This sign may be more obvious in children).
* Stridor, a harsh raspy vibrating when you breathe in that sometimes sounds like a seal. (Stridor is more common in children than adults).

**What is the common cold?**

The [common cold](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/12342-common-cold) refers to at least 200 different viruses that cause a cold. Colds often go away on their own. Colds can:

* Occur at any age.
* Have a wide range of symptoms.
* Spread through direct contact with respiratory secretions, like saliva, mucus or phlegm.
* Last about seven to 10 days, though a cough can last up to three weeks.
* Lead to complications such as ear infections, eye infections, sinus infections and pneumonia.

Treating a cold can help you feel better:

* Use acetaminophen (Tylenol®) if you have body aches and fever.
* Stay hydrated. Make sure to drink a lot, especially fluids such as water, tea and broth.
* Get plenty of rest.

**What is epiglottitis?**

The epiglottis is the top part of your trachea, your breathing tube. It sits far back in your mouth, at the base of your tongue. [Epiglottitis](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/17844-epiglottitis) is when the epiglottis gets inflamed. This condition can be serious. If the epiglottis swells from inflammation, it can block your airway. You may have trouble breathing. If you think you or a loved one has epiglottitis, get medical help right away.

Symptoms of epiglottitis include:

* Difficulty breathing or swallowing.
* Fever.
* Severe sore throat.

Epiglottitis requires treatment at a hospital or medical facility. Healthcare providers first need to check your oxygen levels and protect your airway. You may need supplemental oxygen if your oxygen levels are too low. You may also need:

* IV fluids to keep you hydrated until you can swallow without problems.
* Antibiotics, if your provider thinks you may have a bacterial infection.
* [Steroids](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/drugs/4812-corticosteroids) to reduce the swelling.

**What is laryngitis?**

Your [larynx](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/14520-laryngology) is your voice box. Laryngitis is when the larynx becomes inflamed. Usually, a virus infects the upper airways, leading to laryngitis. The main symptom of laryngitis is a voice change. You may:

* Become very hoarse.
* Only be able to talk at a low volume.
* Lose your voice entirely.

You may also get a fever, have difficulty swallowing and have a sore throat. Your healthcare provider can discuss treatment options with you. You most likely won’t need antibiotics since the cause is usually viral, not bacterial. To treat laryngitis:

* Rest your voice. Try not to speak. If you do need to speak, talk in a low voice rather than a whisper. Whispering can irritate your larynx.
* Drink plenty of extra fluids.
* Breathe in steam.
* Use cough suppressants.

**What is pharyngitis?**

[Pharyngitis](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/symptoms/8274-sore-throat-pharyngitis) is also known as a sore throat. It’s usually caused by a virus. Sometimes, bacteria called group A *Streptococcus* can cause a type of sore throat called [strep throat](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/4602-strep-throat). Strep throat is more common in children between ages 5 and 15. Symptoms of a sore throat may include:

* Severe throat pain.
* Difficulty swallowing and speaking.
* Ear pain.
* Tender lymph nodes in the neck.
* Swollen, red tonsils.

Your healthcare provider may do a throat swab (strep test) to find out if it’s a bacterial infection. If the test is positive for strep throat, you’ll take a course of antibiotics, such as penicillin.

If the test is negative, your provider may recommend:

* Over-the-counter pain relievers, such as acetaminophen or [nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/drugs/11086-non-steroidal-anti-inflammatory-medicines-nsaids) (NSAIDs), to help with throat pain.
* Gargling with warm salt water to soothe your throat.
* A single dose of a steroid to help with symptoms.

**What is a sinus infection?**

[Sinusitis](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/17701-sinusitis), or a sinus infection, is a common problem. It happens when your sinuses become inflamed. Sinuses are hollow spaces located behind the bones of your face. You have sinuses in your:

* Cheeks.
* Behind your forehead and eyebrows.
* On the sides of your nose bridge.
* Beyond your nose, in front of your brain.

Most often, viruses infect the sinuses, causing inflammation. You may feel or have:

* Postnasal drip, when you feel mucus dripping into your throat.
* Green mucus from your nose.
* Stuffiness or congestion.
* Pain when you press on your face, especially on the bones right under your eyes.
* Bad breath.
* Cough.
* Fatigue.
* Fever.
* Headaches.

If you have these symptoms lasting longer than 7-10 days, or if your symptoms worsen after 5-7 days, you may have a bacterial infection. Please see your healthcare provider for a diagnosis. Antibiotics may be needed to clear up a sinus infection in this case

**What are common respiratory infections in children?**

Respiratory infections are common in children. They happen more often when children are in daycare or school. Siblings can infect each other as well.

It’s normal for kids to have up to six respiratory infections per year. And they can last up to two weeks. Most of the time, at-home remedies are enough to help your child feel better until the virus passes.

But if you have any concerns, see your child’s healthcare provider. Certain infections require antibiotics. And if your child has worrying symptoms, such as a high fever or difficulty breathing, contact your provider or go to the emergency room.

Common respiratory infections among children include:

* Bronchiolitis, an infection that causes wheezing and coughing.
* [Common cold](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/17834-common-cold-in-babies), which usually involves a runny nose, cough and feeling run-down.
* [Croup](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/8277-croup), which causes a hoarse cough that sounds like a seal.
* [Ear infections](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/8613-ear-infection-otitis-media), when bacteria infect the middle ear, causing pain.
* [Pink eye](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/8614-pink-eye-conjunctivitis), an eye infection, usually bacterial, that can cause a thick yellow discharge from the eye.
* Sinus infection, when viruses or bacteria infect and inflame the sinuses, causing pain.
* Sore throat, which can be viral or bacterial (strep throat).

**Is the flu an upper respiratory infection?**

[Influenza](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/4335-influenza-flu), or the flu, isn’t considered an upper respiratory infection. That’s because it’s systemic — it affects more than one system in the body. It usually affects the upper and lower respiratory system. The [cold and flu](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/13756--colds-and-flu-symptoms-treatment-prevention-when-to-call) have similar symptoms.

The flu often comes along with symptoms such as achiness and a high temperature, in addition to upper respiratory symptoms like a cough and sore throat. See your healthcare provider if you think you may have the flu. You can take steps to prevent the flu, such as getting the flu vaccine every year.

**Is pneumonia an upper respiratory infection?**

[Pneumonia](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/4471-pneumonia) is a lung infection. Symptoms can resemble those of an upper respiratory infection. You may have a severe cough that brings up phlegm (mucus), shortness of breath and chest pain. See your healthcare provider if you think you may have pneumonia.

**How can I prevent upper respiratory infections?**

Keep you and your family healthy. Take steps to prevent upper respiratory infections:

**Practice good hygiene:**

* Wash hands, especially before eating or preparing food.
* Sneeze and cough into your arm or a tissue and wash hands after.

**Live a healthy lifestyle:**

* Avoid contact with people who are sick.
* Drink plenty of fluids.
* Get enough sleep.
* Stop smoking.

**See your provider:**

* Keep up with routine checkups and immunizations.
* Ask your provider if you should get the [pneumococcal vaccine](https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/drugs/18520-pneumococcal-vaccine-polyvalent-solution-for-injection), which prevents pneumonia.
* Call your healthcare provider if you have symptoms lasting longer than two weeks, a high fever or any other concern.

**Should I worry about an upper respiratory infection?**

Most of the time, these infections go away on their own. You’ll likely make a full recovery. However, some higher-risk groups should take extra precautions when it comes to upper respiratory infections. These infections can be more dangerous for:

* Children, especially babies.
* Older adults.
* People with immune system disorders.

If you are in a high-risk group and get a cold or other respiratory infection, contact your healthcare provider.

**What complications can happen from upper respiratory infections?**

Severe complications can include respiratory failure when there’s too much carbon dioxide in your blood. The infection could also spread to other parts of your body, such as your brain or heart. If you have any concerns about your symptoms, call your healthcare provider. If you are having trouble breathing or other worrisome symptoms, call 911 or head to the nearest ER.

**A note from Cleveland Clinic**

Upper respiratory infections are common. Anyone can get an upper respiratory infection, though they happen more frequently among children. Upper respiratory infection symptoms include coughing, runny nose, sneezing and throat pain. You may also get a fever. These infections usually go away on their own. You can use pain relievers to feel better. Make sure to drink plenty of fluids and get rest. If you are concerned about your symptoms, or they don’t go away after two weeks, contact your healthcare provider.