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# Cold

The first symptom of a cold is usually a sore throat. This is generally followed by sneezing or a blocked, sore or runny nose.

You may not feel well for the first 2 to 3 days. But then you will slowly start to improve. Symptoms usually last about a week.

## Symptoms of a cold

Cold symptoms can include:

- blocked or runny nose
- sore throat
- headaches
- muscle aches
- coughs
- sneezing
- a raised temperature
- pressure in your ears and face
- loss of taste and smell

The symptoms are the same in adults and children. Sometimes, symptoms last longer in children.

## Check if it is a cold, flu or COVID-19

Cold, flu and COVID-19 symptoms are similar.

Flu symptoms tend to be more severe than symptoms of a cold.

## Cold

When you have a cold, it usually:

- comes on slowly
- affects your nose and throat
- makes you feel unwell but you're OK to carry on as normal

## Flu

When you have flu, it usually:

- comes on quickly - within a few hours
- affects more than just your nose and throat
- makes you feel exhausted and too unwell to carry on as normal

[Symptoms, diagnosis and treatment of flu](#)

## COVID-19

Symptoms of COVID-19 can be mistaken for cold symptoms. COVID-19 symptoms can range from mild to severe.

[Get advice about symptoms of COVID-19 and what to do](#)

## Causes of colds

Colds are caused by viruses. They can easily spread to other people. You are infectious until all your symptoms have gone. This usually takes about a week.

Colds are spread by germs from coughs and sneezes. The germs can live on hands and surfaces for 24 hours.

To reduce the risk of spreading a cold you should:


- wash your hands often with warm water and soap
- cough into your elbow to stop germs getting on to your hands and spreading to other people
- use tissues to trap germs when you cough or sneeze
- bin used tissues as quickly as possible

## How to prevent getting a cold

To avoid getting a cold:

- wash your hands with warm water and soap, especially before eating
- do not share towels or household items, such as cups, with someone who has a cold
- do not touch your eyes or nose - you can infect yourself if you've come in contact with the virus
- try to stay healthy - exercise regularly and [eat well](#)

[How to clean your hands](#)



The flu vaccine helps prevent flu but not colds.

# Treatment

Most colds can be treated at home. Symptoms usually clear up by themselves without any specific treatment.

There are some things you can do to help clear up symptoms.

## Do

- ✓ drink plenty of liquids
- ✓ get lots of rest
- ✓ eat healthy food
- ✓ ask your pharmacist about products and medicines that will help

## Medicines to help ease a cold

You can get most medicines for a cold without a prescription.

Medicines that can help include:

- paracetamol or ibuprofen - for pain or a fever
- nasal saline sprays - for a blocked nose
- throat sprays and lozenges - for a sore throat
- cough remedies - for a cough

### ⚠ Important

Be careful taking cough and cold medicines if you're also taking paracetamol and ibuprofen tablets. Do not take more than the recommended dose.

Some medicines for colds are not suitable for children, babies and pregnant women. Check with your pharmacist.

There's little evidence that supplements such as vitamin C, zinc, echinacea or garlic prevent colds or speed up recovery.

## Antibiotics

Antibiotics do not relieve the symptoms of a cold or speed up your recovery.

Antibiotics are only effective against bacterial infections. Colds are caused by viruses.

Do not ask your GP for antibiotics for a cold - overuse of antibiotics can cause [antibiotic resistance](#).

### Contact your GP if:

- your symptoms do not improve after 3 weeks
- your symptoms get suddenly worse
- [your temperature is very high](#) or you feel hot and shivery
- you develop a rash
- you're concerned about your child's symptoms
- you have a long-term medical condition - for example, diabetes, or a heart, lung, kidney or neurological disease
- you have a weak immune system

### Contact your GP and ask for an urgent appointment if:

- you're finding it hard to breathe or develop chest pain

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