

# Respiratory tract infections

Respiratory tract infections (RTIs) can affect the sinuses, throat, airways or lungs. Most RTIs get better without treatment, but sometimes you may need to see your GP.

## RTI symptoms

Symptoms of an RTI include:

- [a cough](#) – you may bring up mucus (phlegm)
- sneezing
- a stuffy or runny nose
- a [sore throat](#)
- headaches
- muscle aches
- [breathlessness, tight chest or wheezing](#)
- [a high temperature](#) (fever)
- feeling generally unwell

### Call your GP if you have:

- high temp
- new, continuous cough
- loss to your sense of smell or taste

These are symptoms of COVID-19.

[Advice about COVID-19 symptoms and what to do](#)

## Treating RTI symptoms at home

Most RTIs pass within 1 to 2 weeks. You can usually treat your symptoms at home.

## Do

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- ✓ get plenty of rest
- ✓ drink lots of water to loosen any mucus and make it easier to cough up
- ✓ drink a hot honey and lemon drink to help soothe a cough (not suitable for babies)
- ✓ gargle with warm salt water if you have a sore throat (children should not try this)
- ✓ raise your head up while sleeping using extra pillows to make breathing easier and clear your chest of mucus
- ✓ use painkillers to bring down a fever and help ease a sore throat, headaches and muscle pain

## Don't

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- ✗ do not smoke – it can make your symptoms worse
- ✗ do not give aspirin to children under 16

► [How to make a hot lemon and honey drink](#)

► [How to gargle with salt water](#)

## A pharmacist can help with an RTI

A pharmacist can suggest treatments to help relieve your symptoms, such as decongestants and nasal sprays.

You can also buy cough medicines and throat lozenges, but there's little evidence to show they help.

Some treatments contain paracetamol and ibuprofen. If you're taking these medicines separately, do not take more than the recommended dose.

Certain treatments are not suitable for children, babies and pregnant women. Your pharmacist can advise you about the best treatment for you or your child.

## When to contact your GP

If you think you have an RTI, contact your GP if:

- you feel very unwell or your symptoms get worse
- you cough up blood or bloodstained mucus
- you have had a cough for more than 3 weeks
- you're pregnant
- you're over 65
- you have a weakened immune system – for example, because you have a condition like [diabetes](#) or you're having chemotherapy
- you have a long-term health condition, such as a heart, lung or kidney condition

It's important to get help if you are very unwell. You may have [pneumonia](#) if your symptoms are severe.

## Treatment from your GP

Treatment will depend on the cause of your RTI.

Your RTI may be caused by:

- a virus (like [colds](#)) – this usually clears up by itself after a few weeks and antibiotics will not help
- bacteria (like [pneumonia](#)) – your GP may prescribe [antibiotics](#) - make sure you complete the whole course as advised by your GP, even if you start to feel better

Sometimes a sample of your mucus may need to be tested to see what's causing your RTI.

## Use of antibiotics

Antibiotics are only used to treat bacterial infections. They're not used for treating viral infections because they do not work for this type of infection.

## How to avoid passing RTIs on to others

RTIs are often spread in the coughs and sneezes of someone with an infection.

To protect others:

- cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze
- [wash your hands](#) regularly
- throw away used tissues immediately

## How to avoid getting an RTI

You may be at high risk of getting an RTI. For example, because you're over the age of 65 or have a serious long-term health condition.

If you keep getting RTIs or you're at high risk of getting one, you should:

- ask your GP about the annual [flu vaccine](#)
- ask if you should have the [pneumococcal vaccine](#) – this helps prevent pneumonia
- [stop smoking](#) if you smoke
- [drink less alcohol](#)

## Types of RTIs

RTIs are often spread in the coughs and sneezes of someone with an infection.

There are several different types of RTIs. They're usually grouped into upper and lower RTIs.

Lower RTIs tend to last longer and can be more serious.

### Difference between upper RTIs and lower RTIs

Upper RTIs (sinuses and throat)
Lower RTIs (airways and lungs)
<a href="#">Common cold</a>
Bronchitis
<a href="#">Sinusitis</a> (sinus infection)
Bronchiolitis
<a href="#">Tonsillitis</a>
<a href="#">Chest infection</a>
Laryngitis
<a href="#">Pneumonia</a> (lung infection)

[Flu](#) can be an upper or lower RTI

# Sláintecare.

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