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National Institutes of Health / National Library of Medicine



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URL of this page: <https://medlineplus.gov/commoncold.html>

Common Cold

What is the common cold?

The common cold is a mild infection of your upper respiratory tract (which includes your nose and throat). Colds are probably the most common illness. Adults have an average of 2-3 colds per year, and children have even more. Colds are more common in the winter and spring, but you can get them at any time.

What causes the common cold?

More than 200 different viruses can cause a cold, but rhinoviruses are the most common type. The viruses that cause colds are very contagious. They can spread from person to person through the air and close personal contact. You can also get infected when you touch something that has the virus on it and then touch your eyes, mouth, or nose. For example, you could get a cold after you shake hands with someone who has a cold or touch a doorknob that has the germs on it, and then touch your face.

What are the symptoms of the common cold?

The symptoms of a common cold usually include:

- Sneezing
- Stuffy nose (congestion)
- Runny nose
- Sore throat [<https://medlineplus.gov/sorethroat.html>]
- Coughing [<https://medlineplus.gov/cough.html>]
- Headache [<https://medlineplus.gov/headache.html>]

The symptoms usually start a few days after you become infected with the virus. Some symptoms can last for 10-14 days.

What are the treatments for the common cold?

There is no cure for the common cold. But there are treatments that can make you feel better while you wait for the cold to go away on its own:

- Getting lots of rest.

- Drinking plenty of fluids.
- Using a clean humidifier or cool mist vaporizer.
- Gargling with warm salt water.
- Using saline nose drops or sprays.
- Taking over-the-counter pain [<https://medlineplus.gov/painrelievers.html>] or cold and cough medicines [<https://medlineplus.gov/coldandcoughmedicines.html>] . But you need to be careful with certain medicines:
 - Children and teens should not take aspirin.
 - Some cold and cough medicines contain ingredients that are not recommended for children. Talk with your child's health care provider before giving your child any cold and cough medicines.
 - Some cold and cough medicines contain pain relievers. If you also take a separate pain reliever with these medicines, you could be getting a dangerous amount of the pain reliever. Read the labels on the medicines and follow the instructions carefully. If you have questions, ask your provider or a pharmacist.

Antibiotics [<https://medlineplus.gov/antibiotics.html>] will not help with a cold. Antibiotics help with bacterial infections, not with viral infections such as colds.

Most people who have a cold will feel better after a week or two. However, some people who get a cold may develop other illnesses, such as bronchitis [<https://medlineplus.gov/acutebronchitis.html>] or pneumonia [<https://medlineplus.gov/pneumonia.html>] . This is more common in people with weakened immune systems, asthma [<https://medlineplus.gov/asthma.html>] , or other respiratory conditions. Contact your provider if you or your child have symptoms that concern you, such as:

- Trouble breathing or fast breathing
- Dehydration [<https://medlineplus.gov/dehydration.html>]
- Fever [<https://medlineplus.gov/fever.html>] that lasts longer than 4 days
- Symptoms that last more than 10 days without improvement
- Symptoms, such as fever or cough, that improve but then return or worsen
- Worsening of chronic medical conditions

Can the common cold be prevented?

There is no vaccine to protect against the common cold. But you may be able to reduce your risk of getting or spreading a cold by:

- Washing your hands [<https://medlineplus.gov/germsandhygiene.html>] often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- Avoiding touching your face, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoiding close contact, such as kissing, shaking hands, and sharing cups and eating utensils, with others if you are sick or they are sick.
- Cleaning and disinfecting surfaces that you frequently touch.
- Covering coughs and sneezes with a tissue. Then throw away the tissue and wash your hands.
- Staying home when sick.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Start Here



- Colds and the Flu [<https://familydoctor.org/condition/colds-and-the-flu/?adfree=true>] (American Academy of Family Physicians)
- Facts about the Common Cold [<https://www.lung.org/lung-health-diseases/lung-disease-lookup/facts-about-the-common-cold>] (American Lung Association)

- Manage Common Cold [<https://www.cdc.gov/common-cold/treatment/>] (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)


Diagnosis and Tests

- Cold and Flu [<https://familydoctor.org/symptom/cold-and-flu/?adfree=true>] (American Academy of Family Physicians)
Also in Spanish [<https://es.familydoctor.org/sintoma/resfriados-y-la-gripe/?adfree=true>]

Treatments and Therapies

- 5 Tips: Natural Products for the Flu and Colds: What Does the Science Say? [<https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/tips/tips-natural-products-for-the-flu-and-colds-what-does-the-science-say>]  (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health)
- Colds, Flu, and Complementary Health Approaches [<https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/colds-flu-and-complementary-health-approaches>]  (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/espanol/la-gripe-y-los-resfriados-en-detalles>]


Related Issues

- About Adenovirus [<https://www.cdc.gov/adenovirus/about/>] (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- Colds, Allergies and Sinusitis - How to Tell the Difference [<https://www.aaaai.org/tools-for-the-public/conditions-library/allergies/colds-allergies-sinusitis>] (American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.aaaai.org/Aaaai/media/MediaLibrary/PDF%20Documents/Spanish/EL-allergies-colds-allergies-sinusitis-patient-spanish.pdf>]
- Humidifiers: Ease Skin, Breathing Symptoms [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/common-cold/in-depth/humidifiers/art-20048021?p=1>] (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)
- Is It Flu, COVID-19, Allergies, or a Cold? [<https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2022/01/it-flu-covid-19-allergies-or-cold>]  (National Institutes of Health)
Also in Spanish [<https://salud.nih.gov/recursos-de-salud/nih-noticias-de-salud/es-gripe-covid-19-alergias-o-un-resfriado>]
- Limit Asthma Attacks Caused by Colds or Flu [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/asthma-attack/in-depth/asthma/art-20043943?p=1>] (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/es/diseases-conditions/asthma-attack/in-depth/asthma/art-20043943?p=1>]
- Marvels of Mucus and Phlegm: The Slime That Keeps You Healthy [<https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2020/08/marvels-mucus-phlegm>]  (National Institutes of Health)
Also in Spanish [<https://salud.nih.gov/recursos-de-salud/nih-noticias-de-salud/las-maravillas-de-la-mucosidad-y-la-flema>]
- Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) [<https://www.niaid.nih.gov/diseases-conditions/respiratory-syncytial-virus-rsv>]  (National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases)
- Rhinovirus Infections [<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/ear-nose-throat/Pages/Rhinovirus-Infections.aspx>] (American Academy of Pediatrics)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.healthychildren.org/spanish/health-issues/conditions/ear-nose-throat/paginas/rhinovirus-infections.aspx>]
- Runny Nose [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/symptoms/runny-nose/basics/definition/SYM-20050640?p=1>] (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/es/symptoms/runny-nose/basics/definition/sym-20050640?p=1>]

Test Your Knowledge

- Is It a Cold or Allergy? [https://medlineplus.gov/ency/quiz/000678_35.htm] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/quiz/000678_114.htm]

Clinical Trials


- ClinicalTrials.gov: Common Cold [<https://clinicaltrials.gov/search?cond=%22Common+Cold%22&aggFilters=status:not%20rec>]  (National Institutes of Health)

Journal Articles

References and abstracts from MEDLINE/PubMed (National Library of Medicine)

- Article: Trends in US Pediatric Unintentional Nonprescription Cold and Cough, Analgesic and... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40434620>]
- Article: Status and influencing factors of OTC medicine use for self-medication in... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40413411>]
- Article: Clinical Efficacy of Probiotics for Relieving Cold Symptoms in Healthy Individuals:... [<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/40362799>]
- Common Cold -- see more articles [<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/?term=%22Common+Cold%22%5Bmajr%3A%5D+AND+humans%5Bmh%5D+AND+english%5Bla%5D+AND+%22last+1+Year%22+%5Bdat%5D+NOT+%28letter%5Bpt%5D+OR+case+reports%5Bpt%5D+OR+editorial%5Bpt%5D+OR+comment%5Bpt%5D%29+AND+free+full+text%5Bsb%5D+>]

Find an Expert

- National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases [<https://www.niaid.nih.gov/>] 

Children

- Are Antibiotics Needed for My Child's Runny Nose? Q & A Guide for Parents [<https://www.cdc.gov/antibiotic-use/media/pdfs/Runny-Nose-508.pdf>] (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) - **PDF**
- Common Cold in Babies: Symptoms and Causes [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/common-cold-in-babies/symptoms-causes/syc-20351651?p=1>] (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.mayoclinic.org/es/diseases-conditions/common-cold-in-babies/symptoms-causes/syc-20351651?p=1>]
- Is It a Cold, the Flu, an RSV Infection, or COVID-19? [<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/flu-vs-cold.html>] (Nemours Foundation)
Also in Spanish [<https://kidshealth.org/es/parents/flu-vs-cold.html>]
- Should You Give Kids Medicine for Coughs and Colds? [<https://www.fda.gov/consumers/consumer-updates/should-you-give-kids-medicine-coughs-and-colds>] (Food and Drug Administration)
Also in Spanish [<https://www.fda.gov/consumers/articulos-para-el-consumidor-en-espanol/cuando-dar-medicina-para-la-tos-y-el-resfriado-los-ninos>]
- What Are Colds? [<https://kidshealth.org/en/kids/colds.html>] (Nemours Foundation)

Teenagers

- Coping with Colds [<https://kidshealth.org/en/teens/colds.html>] (Nemours Foundation)
Also in Spanish [<https://kidshealth.org/es/teens/colds.html>]

Patient Handouts

- Common cold [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/000678.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/000678.htm>]

- How to treat the common cold at home [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000466.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/patientinstructions/000466.htm>]
- Stuffy or runny nose - adult [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003049.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/003049.htm>]
- Stuffy or runny nose - children [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003051.htm>] (Medical Encyclopedia)
Also in Spanish [<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish/ency/article/003051.htm>]



MEDICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA

Colds and the flu - what to ask your doctor - adult

[<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000249.htm>]

Colds and the flu - what to ask your doctor - child

[<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000250.htm>]

Common cold [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/000678.htm>]

How to treat the common cold at home [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000466.htm>]

Sneezing [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003060.htm>]

Stuffy or runny nose - adult [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003049.htm>]

Stuffy or runny nose - children [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003051.htm>]

Vitamin C and colds [<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/002145.htm>]

Related Health Topics

Cold and Cough Medicines [<https://medlineplus.gov/coldandcoughmedicines.html>]

Flu [<https://medlineplus.gov/flu.html>]

Sinusitis [<https://medlineplus.gov/sinusitis.html>]

Viral Infections [<https://medlineplus.gov/viralinfections.html>]

National Institutes of Health

The primary NIH organization for research on *Common Cold* is the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases [<http://www.niaid.nih.gov/>]

NIH MedlinePlus Magazine

Achoo! Cold, Flu, or Something Else? [<https://magazine.medlineplus.gov/article/achoo-cold-flu-or-something-else>]

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