

# Coughs and colds

**Ask your local community pharmacist for advice on treatments for coughs and colds**

## ABOUT COUGHS AND COLDS

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Coughs and colds are very common and most people will have one this autumn or winter. Every year adults get an average of two to four colds, and two to five coughs per year. They are infections that are caused by viruses and are rarely serious. Coughs and colds usually get better by themselves. Complications of colds can include chest infections, pneumonia or ear infections, but these are very rare. Coughs are usually harmless although they can affect your quality of life as they can be irritating and distressing to yourself and others.

## SYMPTOMS

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### Symptoms of a cold include

- Cough
- Mild temperature
- Sneezing
- Sore throat
- Runny nose
- Aches and pains
- Blocked nose
- Headache

### Types of cough

- Coughs can be dry and tickly and usually felt in the throat.
- Coughs can be chesty and productive where you produce phlegm.
- Coughs that last less than three weeks are known as 'acute' and generally caused by viruses.
- Coughs that last eight weeks or more are chronic. These are common in smokers and can sometimes indicate a problem in the lungs. A chronic cough could also be related to other health problems, for example heartburn, reflux, asthma, a side effect of medication or from an environmental irritant.

## What to expect

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| <p><b>Catching a cold</b></p>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The cold virus can be spread by coughing, sneezing or transferred by touch.</li> <li>• If you have a cold you should wash your hands often and carry tissues to prevent spreading your cold.</li> </ul>   |
| <p><b>Duration of symptoms</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adults can expect cold symptoms to last about a week. In young children symptoms can last up to two weeks. In the first two to three days cold symptoms are worse. After this they should start to improve.</li> <li>• Coughs can last three to four weeks after your cold has got better.</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Cure for colds</b></p>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unfortunately <b>there is no cure for the common cold</b>. Our bodies naturally fight the infection and there are medications you can buy over-the-counter to help relieve your symptoms.</li> </ul>  |

## What can I do to help?

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| <p><b>Rest</b></p> <p>Get plenty of rest until you feel better and are well enough to return to a normal level of activity</p>   | <p><b>Eat healthily and drink plenty</b></p> <p>Drink plenty of fluids, preferably water to prevent dehydration. Eat a healthy diet which includes five portions of fruit or vegetables a day.</p> |
| <p><b>Stop smoking</b></p> <p>Smoking is the most common cause of chronic cough. By stopping or cutting down smoking you can improve your cough and also reduce the risk of heart attack, stroke or lung cancer.</p> | <p><b>Home remedies</b></p> <p>Honey and lemon can help to soothe sore throats and ease coughs. Steam inhalation can help blocked noses.</p>   |
| <p><b>Try not to cough!</b></p> <p>This is not easy but the desire to cough is sometimes controlled by the brain, so trying not to cough can help you cough less.</p>  |  |

## How to treat coughs and colds

**Antibiotics will not cure coughs and colds** and rather than helping you feel better they could cause harmful side effects. Over-the-counter medicines can help relieve symptoms; your local community pharmacist can offer you help and advice.

### Paracetamol, ibuprofen or aspirin

These can help reduce symptoms such as sore throat, fevers, headaches, aches and pains.

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| <b>Maximum doses</b> | <p>The maximum recommended daily dose of paracetamol is 4g or 8 tablets in 24 hours for adults.</p> <p>Lower doses are recommended for children.</p> <p>Many cold remedies contain also paracetamol, so check the ingredients carefully. The paracetamol in cold and flu remedies counts towards the maximum daily dose.</p>   |
|                      | <p>Ibuprofen and other non-steroid anti-inflammatory drugs should be used carefully especially if you have or had a stomach ulcer, asthma, heart, liver or kidney problems and patients taking certain blood pressure tablets should check with a pharmacist first. Aspirin should NOT be given to children under 16 as it can cause a very rare illness called Reye's syndrome, which can be fatal.</p> |

### Cough mixtures and cold remedies

Cough mixtures are available for dry coughs and chesty coughs however there is little evidence that these work. Many cough, cold and flu remedies contain paracetamol, which count towards the maximum daily dose, **take care not to take too much.**

### Decongestants

Decongestants in nasal sprays and tablets can help clear blocked noses. They should only be used for 3 to 7 days as longer use can block your nose up again (known as rebound congestion). Vapour rubs and steam inhalation can also help unblock stuffy noses.

### Be aware that

- Some cough and cold remedies can make you feel drowsy. This can be helpful if you are having trouble sleeping, however **do not drive if you feel drowsy**.
- Most over-the-counter medications for coughs and colds **are not suitable for children under 6 years old**. If your child is unwell your local community pharmacist can offer you help and advice.

### When should I see a GP?

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Most coughs and colds are not serious and get better themselves, however, contact your GP if you experience any of the following:

- High temperature above 39°C.
- Confusion or disorientation.
- Sharp chest pain or shoulder pain.
- Severe headache.
- Cough up blood in your phlegm.
- Difficulty in breathing.
- Weight loss for no apparent reason.
- A hoarse voice for longer than three weeks or hoarseness that persists after your cough has gone.
- Severe swelling in the neck and/or armpits.
- Symptoms/cough that last longer than three weeks.

### More information is available at

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<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/coldsandflu/Pages/Coldcomfort.aspx>

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Cold-common/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

<http://www.patient.co.uk/health/common-cold-and-other-upper-respiratory-tract-infections>

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/cough/pages/introduction.aspx>