

# Common Cold – Viral Upper Respiratory Tract Infection

A cold is caused by a viral infection of the upper respiratory tract (nose, mouth, sinuses, throat, larynx/voice box/windpipe). Most viral infections are self-limiting and resolve on their own.



## What to Expect

The symptoms of the common cold will usually resolve within a week. However, some people may continue to have symptoms for 2-3 weeks.

Symptoms of the common cold include:

- A runny nose.
- Nasal congestion.
- Sneezing.
- Cough.
- Sore or scratchy throat.
- A low-grade fever (< 38 °C or 100.4 °F)

Treatments for the common cold are aimed at symptom relief, but do not shorten or cure the cold.

Antibiotics only work for **bacterial** infections, **NOT** viral infections.

It is **normal** for your mucus to become yellow or green as your cold progresses and does not mean you need antibiotics.



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### Recommended Follow-Up

Follow up in \_\_ days.

Name of Provider

Reason

Date/Time

Location

Contact Info

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



## When to Get Help

### Go to the nearest Emergency Department or Urgent Care Centre if you:

- Have chest pain.
- Persistent high fever not responsive to acetaminophen (e.g., Tylenol,) or ibuprofen (e.g., Advil, Motrin).
- Persistent or increasing shortness of breath.
- Severe headache, neck pain or stiffness.
- Dizziness, weakness, confusion or constant lack of energy.

### See your healthcare provider, go to a walk-in clinic or call 811 (711 for the hearing impaired) if you:

- Cough up thick gray or bloody sputum/phlegm.
- Have pain in your sinuses or an earache
- Develop MILD shortness of breath.
- A fever that lasts over 5 days.
- Worsening symptoms after a few days of getting better.
- Do not start to get better after 2 weeks.
- You have worsening asthma with colds.

### To Learn More Ask:

- Your health care provider.
- HealthLinkBC - call 8-1-1 (7-1-1 for deaf or hard of hearing) or go online to [www.HealthLinkBC.ca](http://www.HealthLinkBC.ca).



## How to Care for Yourself at Home

### Rest and Remedies

- Get plenty of sleep. Adjust sleeping position to prop your head up with pillows to help mucus clearing.
- Drink lots of fluids (8 glasses a day) such as water and fruit juice. Warm fluids such as tea and soups can also sooth your symptoms. Adding honey can also relieve sore throats and coughs.

## Common Cold Discharge Instructions - continued

## Notes:

- Use a cool-mist humidifier (vaporizer) to increase air moisture to ease breathing.
- Breathe some steamy air but **NOT** hot steam directly which can damage your nasal passages.
- Gargling with salted water can help clear mucus and soothe sore throats: mix ½ teaspoon salt in 8 ounces of warm water.
- Limit smoking or vaping.
- Eat a healthy diet to support your immune system: high in fresh fruits (e.g., berries, citrus fruits) and vegetables (e.g., leafy greens, peppers, carrots).
- Can take vitamin C supplements, ask your pharmacist for more information.
- Use saline nose drops or sprays.

## Medication

Start by taking acetaminophen or ibuprofen for fever, aches and sweats, if no allergies. Check the bottle of the medication you have purchased for instructions, but we suggest:



### ACETAMINOPHEN (E.G., TYLENOL®, PARACETAMOL)

- 500-1000 mg every 4-6 hours as needed while awake, with water (max: 4000mg/day).

If you have liver disease or drink over 3 alcoholic beverages per day:

- Maximum dose: 3000mg per day.
- Do not use this medicine for longer than 5-7 days. Speak to your primary care provider if you need to use this for longer.

Be careful not to exceed the maximum dose when taking this medication with other medication that contain acetaminophen (e.g. Dayquil/Nyquil®).

### IBUPROFEN (E.G., ADVIL®, MOTRIN®)

- 200-400 mg every 6-8 hours as needed while awake, taken with a small snack (Max: 1200mg/day).
- Avoid taking this medication for longer than 5-7 days. See your primary care provider if you need to use this for longer.

## Common Cold Discharge Instructions - continued

- Avoid this medication if you are over 65, pregnant, or have the following conditions: severe liver or kidney disease, peptic ulcer disease or heart failure. Speak to your primary care provider before taking this if you have a history of stroke, GERD, inflammatory bowel disease, liver cirrhosis, or ischemic vascular disease.

Do not take this with other NSAID medications, such as naproxen (e.g., Aleve®) or celecoxib (e.g., Celebrex®).

### OTHER OVER-THE-COUNTER COLD REMEDIES

Consult your pharmacist or healthcare provider before to taking any additional medication, particularly, if you are taking numerous medications or have underlying medical conditions. These medications have unclear benefits and can cause additional side effects (e.g., heart strain, drowsiness, etc.).

Including, but not limited to:

- Antihistamines (e.g., Reactine®, Benadryl®).
- Decongestants (e.g., Otrivin®, Dristan®).
- Cough Syrups (e.g., Buckley's®).
- Nasal Corticosteroids (e.g., Flonase®, Nasacort®).

### **Prevention:**

Colds are often transmitted via touching hands, touching a surface, sneezing, or coughing.

Here are some preventative measures you can take:

- Avoid close contact with people who have a cold.
- Use face masks when sick or around sick contacts.
- Avoid touching your nose, mouth and eyes.
- Wash your hands often, especially after you blow your nose. See “Additional Information.”
- Sneeze and cough into your elbow or a tissue, away from others.
- If soap and water are not available, use alcohol-based hand gels.
- **DO NOT** share food and drinks.

Reproduced with permission from Vancouver Coastal Health and Providence Health Care. Find this information sheet on the ECBC website:  
[https://emergencycarebc.ca/clinical\\_resource/patient-information-sheet/colds/](https://emergencycarebc.ca/clinical_resource/patient-information-sheet/colds/)

### Notes:

### **Additional Information**

- For more information on handwashing, see:  
<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/hand-washing-help-stop-spread-germs>
- For more information on colds, see:  
<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/illnesses-conditions/cold-and-flu/colds>
- For more information on colds in children, see:  
<https://www.cheo.on.ca/en/resources-and-support/p6251.aspx>

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