

Live Well to
Learn Well

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health.cornell.edu

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Appointments:
Monday–Saturday

Check web for hours,
services, providers,
and appointment
information

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What is a URI?

An upper respiratory infection (URI) is a term used to describe an acute infection of the head and chest. Generally, it affects the nose, throat, airways, sinuses and/or ears. URIs are among the most common diagnoses at Cornell Health.

How long will it last?

Probably longer than you'd like. Symptoms usually worsen during the first 3–5 days, followed by gradual improvement. Most URIs resolve within 10–14 days, even without treatment.

Treatment

Antibiotics only work on bacterial infections. Because URIs usually are caused by viruses, antibiotics are not an effective treatment. Fortunately, there are many options that help alleviate symptoms *when used as directed*.

Nasal congestion, post nasal dripping, or sinus pressure:

- Use an oral decongestant, such as pseudoephedrine or Mucinex D to reduce nasal and sinus congestion. Decongestants are available at pharmacies, including Cornell Health's. Decongestants should not be used by individuals with certain medical conditions.
- Nasal sprays, such as oxymetazoline (Afrin), can help relieve nasal discomfort, congestion, and/or pressure. Decongestant sprays should not be used longer than three consecutive days.
- Nasal rinsing with saline nasal spray or salt water (e.g., neti pot) can help relieve nasal dryness.
- Use a warm mist humidifier or take a steamy shower to increase moisture in the air and soothe oral and nasal tissues that become irritated with dry air.

Sore throat:

- Use a pain reliever, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil).
- Gargle with salt water (1/4 tsp of salt dissolved in 8 oz of warm water). Salt water can be used as often as you like.
- Throat lozenges or throat sprays (Cepacol lozenges or Chloroseptic spray) may bring some relief by increasing saliva production and lubricating your throat.
- Drink plenty of fluids (e.g., water, diluted juice, tea) to soothe your throat and to stay well hydrated.

Coughing:

- Coughing often occurs during the later stages of a URI. It may be dry or produce phlegm or mucus.
- Medications that contain dextromethorphan



(e.g., Robitussin DM, Mucinex DM, Delsym) may help to suppress a cough.

- Tea with honey, when taken regularly, can soothe a sore throat and help suppress a cough.

Take care with medications

- Be familiar with the individual ingredients in every medication you take, so you treat your symptoms appropriately.
- Watch for ingredient overlap between products (e.g., acetaminophen, ibuprofen, pseudoephedrine). Don't accidentally take too much of any ingredient.
- Don't take medications longer than recommended.
- Follow any specific instructions given by your health care provider. This is especially important if you have an underlying health condition.
- If you have questions or concerns, ask a pharmacist for assistance or consult with your health care provider.

Note: generic medications contain the same active ingredients as name brands.

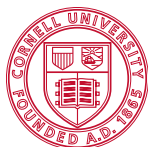
Strengthen your immune system:

- Make sure you eat well (e.g., a healthy, balanced variety of foods).
- Avoid alcohol as it can directly suppress various immune responses.
- Stay away from cigarettes, and second hand smoke.
- Rest as much as possible and get plenty of sleep (at least 8 hours).

When to seek help

Sometimes upper respiratory infections become worse instead of better.

Secondary bacterial infections can develop that



require further treatment (e.g., antibiotics). Don't delay seeking help if you experience any of the following symptoms:

- A fever greater than 101 F for longer than two days
- Breathing problems like feeling short of breath, having pain or tightness in your chest or wheezing (high pitched whistling sounds when you breath in)
- A cough that is painful, worsening or lasting longer than two weeks
- A bad sore throat that lasts longer than three days, or worsens.
- Very swollen glands in your neck that aren't going away
- Pain in your face or teeth that is not improving after a few days of decongestant use
- A headache that lasts longer than a few days or is very severe
- A rash
- Persistent abdominal pain
- Significant drowsiness or confusion

Reduce risk of spreading URI to others

URI infections are contagious; help reduce the spread.

- Wash your hands frequently and/or use a hand sanitizer after touching your face.
- Cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing.
- Avoid sharing items like cups and lip balm.

More information

- **Call Cornell Health** at 607-255-5155.
- **Medicine Plus:**
nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/commoncold.html
- **Centers for Disease Control & Prevention:**
cdc.gov/getsmart/community/materials-references/print-materials/hcp/adult-tract-infection.pdf