

Upper Respiratory Tract Infection (Common Cold)

Respiratory tract infections are most often caused by viruses, which means antibiotics will not cure them ...

The good news is that you don't need to see a medical provider if you have the "common cold." The bad news is that you can often feel lousy for 10–12 days, and coughs related to these infections can last 3-4 weeks.

Symptoms

- Develop over 2-4 days; feel the worst days 3-5
- Sore throat
- Fatigue
- Nasal congestion
- Runny nose
- Cough
- Fever up to 102°F
- Headache
- Muscle aches
- Watery eyes

Self-care measures

- Rest (sleep at least 8 hours a night).
- Hydrate with plenty of water (avoid caffeine and alcohol).
- Use saline nose drops to loosen mucus (e.g., a saline rinse (Netipot) or spray).
- Take Ibuprofen (Advil®) or Acetaminophen (Tylenol®) as needed to reduce fever or discomfort (follow package directions for dosing).
- Gargle with salt water and use throat sprays/lozenges for throat pain.
- Use heated, humidified air. If you do not have a humidifier, take hot showers.
- Use nasal decongestant spray (Oxymetazoline) for short-term relief of nasal congestion. Do not use for more than 3 days.
- Take an oral decongestant for short-term relief of nasal congestion. Try Sudafed® (pseudoephedrine).*

(over)

- Use non-prescription cough medication containing Dextromethorphan and/or Guaifenesin.*

** If you take stimulant medications and/or have a history of significant anxiety/depression, check with a pharmacist before using these decongestant or cough medicines.*

All students should take care when using these medications. Always check for ingredient overlap between products. For example, some cold medicines already contain acetaminophen, so don't inadvertently double up on a dosage. If you're not sure what the correct dosage is, please consult a pharmacist.

Limit spread to others

- Wash hands frequently.
- Cover coughs and sneezes using the crook of your elbow.
- If you have a fever, stay home and away from others until fever-free for more than 24 hours (temperature should be less than 100°F without medication).

When to seek medical care

- Fever over 102° F for more than 3 days
- Symptoms that last over 10 days and are getting worse instead of better
- Shortness of breath/wheezing
- Pain/pressure in your chest
- Severe sinus pain
- Very swollen glands in the neck or jaw
- Significant sore throat for more than a week

To make an appointment at Cornell Health, call 607-255-5155 during business hours, or go to myCornellHealth (from health.cornell.edu) and find a time that works for you.

More information

- Family Doctor Symptom Checker:
familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/health-tools/search-by-symptom/cold-flu
- Family Doctor Cold & Flu Overview:
familydoctor.org/condition/colds-and-the-flu

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health.cornell.edu/self-care