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Patient education: Cough, runny nose, and the common cold (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

What causes cough, runny nose, and other symptoms of the common cold? — These symptoms are usually caused by a viral infection. Lots of viruses can take hold inside your nose, mouth, throat, or lungs, and cause cold symptoms.

Most people get over a cold without lasting problems. Even so, having a cold can be uncomfortable. And if your child has a cold, it can be hard to know when the symptoms call for a trip to the doctor.

What are the symptoms of the common cold? — The symptoms include:

- Sneezing
- Coughing
- Sniffling and runny nose
- Sore throat
- Chest congestion

In children, the common cold can also cause a fever. But adults do not usually get a fever when they have a cold.

How can I tell if I have a cold or the flu? — The common cold and the flu both cause many of the same symptoms. But they also have some important differences. This table can help you tell the difference between a cold and the flu ([table 1](#)).

When should I call the doctor or nurse? — Most people who have a cold do not need to see the doctor or nurse. But you should call your doctor or nurse if you have:

- A fever of more than 100.4° F (38° C) that comes with shaking chills, loss of appetite, or trouble breathing
- A fever and also have lung disease, such as emphysema or asthma
- A cough that lasts longer than 10 days
- Chest pain when you cough, trouble breathing, or coughing up blood

If you are older than 75, you should also call your doctor or nurse any time you get a long-lasting cough.

Take your child to the emergency room if he or she:

- Becomes confused or stops responding to you
- Has trouble breathing or has to work hard to breathe

Call your child's doctor or nurse if he or she:

- Refuses to drink anything for a long time
- Is younger than 4 months
- Has a fever and is not acting like him- or herself
- Has a cough that lasts for more than 2 weeks and is not getting any better
- Has a stuffed or runny nose that gets worse or does not get better after 2 weeks
- Has red eyes or yellow goop coming out of his or her eyes
- Has ear pain, pulls at his or her ears, or shows other signs of having an ear infection

What can I do to feel better? — If you are a teenager or an adult, you can try cough and cold medicines that you can get without a prescription. These medicines might help with your symptoms. But they won't cure your cold, or help you get well faster.

If you decide to try nonprescription cold medicines, be sure to follow the directions on the label. Do not combine 2 or more medicines that have [acetaminophen](#) in them. If you take too much acetaminophen, the drug can damage your liver. Also, if you have a heart condition, or you take prescription medicines, ask your pharmacist if it is safe to take the cold medicine you have in mind.

What should I know if my child has a cold? — In children, the common cold is often more severe than it is in adults. It also lasts longer. Plus, children often get a fever during the first 3 days of a cold.

Are cough and cold medicines safe for children? — If your child is younger than 6, you should **not** give him or her any cold medicines. These medicines are not safe for young children. Even if your child is older than 6, cough and cold medicines are unlikely to help.

Never give [aspirin](#) to any child younger than 18 years old. In children, aspirin can cause a life-threatening condition called Reye syndrome. When giving your child [acetaminophen](#) or other nonprescription medicines, never give more than the recommended dose.

How long will I be sick? — Colds usually last 3 to 7 days in adults and 10 days in children, but some people have symptoms for up to 2 weeks.

Can the common cold lead to more serious problems? — In **some** cases, yes. In some people having a cold can lead to:

- Pneumonia or bronchitis (infections of the lungs)
- Ear infections
- Worsening of asthma symptoms
- Sinus infections

How can I keep from getting another cold? — The most important thing you can do is to wash your hands often with soap and water. Alcohol hand rubs work well, too. The germs that cause the common cold can live on tables, door handles, and other surfaces for at least 2 hours. You never know when you might be touching germs. That's why it's so important to clean your hands often.

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GRAPHICS

Is it a cold or the flu?

	Cold	Flu
Symptoms		
Fever	Rare	Usual; high (100°F to 102°F; occasionally higher, especially in young children); lasts 3 to 4 days
Headache	Rare	Common
General aches, pains	Slight	Usual; often severe
Fatigue, weakness	Sometimes	Usual; can last up to 2 to 3 weeks
Extreme exhaustion	Never	Usual; at the beginning of the illness
Stuffy nose	Common	Sometimes
Sneezing	Usual	Sometimes
Sore throat	Common	Sometimes
Chest discomfort, cough	Mild to moderate; hacking cough	Common; can become severe

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