

Common Cold in Adults

SELF-CARE FORUM FACT SHEET NO 12

This fact sheet helps you to know what is 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if you develop cold symptoms. It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek advice from a health professional, or in need of urgent medical care.

Useful facts

What is the common cold?

Mild viral infections can cause symptoms of the cold, including a blocked or runny nose, sneezing, cough, a sore throat, a slightly raised body temperature (fever) up to 39°C and feeling generally unwell.

How dangerous are colds?

Colds are harmless and in the vast majority of cases get better by themselves without any complications. If you have a long-term health problem (such as diabetes, heart disease or a respiratory condition) or a weakened immune system (for example due to chemotherapy) you may need to get advice from a member of your pharmacy team, or your GP.

How common are they?

Colds are very common, and adults get an average of 2-4 a year.

Are there any complications?

While the symptoms are unpleasant, the common cold is harmless. Complications, such as chest, ear and other infections, are rare.

Will I need antibiotics?

Most colds get better on their own without treatment. Antibiotics don't work on viruses such as the common cold and may cause side effects.

Effect of smoking:

Cold symptoms such as coughing are more severe if you smoke, and lasts longer. Consider quitting, you can talk to a member of your pharmacy team for advice on how to stop smoking.

What can I expect to happen?

Catching a cold:

We can catch a cold by either breathing in droplets of fluid containing the cold virus (when someone sneezes), or by touching something that someone has sneezed on, and then touching our mouth or nose.

Symptoms:

In adults and older children, cold symptoms last for about a week and a half, and in younger children for up to 2 weeks. Symptoms are usually worst in the first 2 to 3 days, before they gradually start to improve. Coughs may last up to 3 weeks.

There is no cure:

We have no cure for the common cold. But while our bodies fight the infection, there are various ways of relieving our symptoms.

Treatment

Symptom Relief Paracetamol, Ibuprofen or Aspirin can help reduce the symptoms of a cold. Always follow the manufacturer's instructions. Talk to a member of your pharmacy team about medicines that may help ease your symptoms especially if you are taking any regular medication.

What can I do myself to get better?

Simple measures:

Get some rest until you feel better – we usually know when we're well enough to return to normal activities.

Diet and fluids:

Drink plenty of fluids to replace those lost from sweating and a runny nose. Try to eat healthily, including at least five portions of fruit and vegetables every day if possible.

When to seek help

Most colds are not serious and get better by themselves. Contact your surgery or NHS 111 in England and Wales, the Phone First Service in Northern Ireland or NHS24 in Scotland if:

- You develop a high temperature (above 39°C or 102.2°F), or you feel shivery;
- You feel confused or disorientated;
- You notice a sharp pain in your chest;
- You cough up blood;
- You find it difficult to breathe;
- Your symptoms last longer than three weeks;
- Your symptoms suddenly get worse.

Where to find out more

Your pharmacy team can help with advice on how to manage your symptoms. Or visit an NHS website for more information.

[NHS 111 Wales](#)

[NHS website](#)

[NHS Inform Scotland](#)

[NHS Direct NI](#)