

Head & Chest Colds

**What They
Are and
How to
Treat Them**



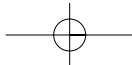
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Sneezing,
scratchy throat,
runny nose,
cough—

Everyone knows the symptoms of head colds and chest colds, among the most common illnesses known.

Although most colds are mild compared with other illnesses, they are the leading reason for doctor visits and missed days of work and school.



Size of the Problem

About 1 billion cases of head cold and chest cold occur each year in the United States. Chest colds are sometimes referred to as “acute bronchitis”. Colds are most common among children. This is because children’s immune systems are not yet fully developed, and because children are often in close contact with their classmates. In general, children have about 6 to 10 colds a year, while adults have about 2 to 4 colds a year.

The Cause

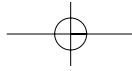
Viruses cause head colds and chest colds. A virus is a type of living thing that can be seen only with a special microscope. There are more than 200 different cold viruses.

There are two common ways of becoming infected with a cold virus. The first is by touching an infected surface, then touching your eyes or nose. The second is by inhaling water droplets that contain virus. This may occur if you are close to someone who has a cold and sneezes.

Prevention

Handwashing is a simple and effective way to reduce the risk. You should also avoid close or prolonged contact with someone who has a cold, and do not share food, drink, or eating utensils with them.

If you have a cold, you should sneeze or cough into a disposable tissue, and throw it away immediately.



Why antibiotics don't work for head colds and chest colds.

Because viruses (not bacteria) cause head and chest colds, antibiotics do not help. Antibiotics only work against bacteria, which are completely different than viruses. Besides not helping, antibiotics can have adverse effects of their own, such as diarrhea or allergic reactions. Taking antibiotics may also increase your risk of becoming infected with bacteria that won't respond to antibiotics.

Unnecessary antibiotic use may also add to the widespread problem of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. **Antibiotic-resistant bacteria** are bacteria that are no longer killed by antibiotics that used to work against them. Resistant bacteria cause a growing number of infections in the United States and throughout the world.

One way to help stop bacteria from becoming resistant is to limit the use of antibiotics to situations when they are needed.

Cold Symptoms

Cold symptoms are caused by the body's defensive reaction to the virus.

Symptoms usually begin 2 to 3 days after infection.

The most common symptoms of a cold are runny nose, nasal stuffiness, sneezing, sore throat, cough, and headache. Fever (temperature greater than 100.5 degrees) is less common in adults than children. Yellow or green mucous or phlegm may be present, but does not indicate a bacterial infection or need for antibiotics. Muscle ache, tiredness, and loss of appetite can also occur.

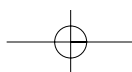
Although cold symptoms can sometimes linger for several weeks, they usually *start* to improve *after* about one to two weeks.

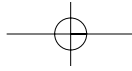


Treating the Symptoms

Head colds and chest colds get better by themselves, without any treatment. Aside from getting enough rest, there is nothing that you can do to speed your recovery. However, while you are waiting for your body to fight off the cold virus, there are some things that you can do to try to relieve your symptoms:

- A humidifier or vaporizer can temporarily clear your nose and make it easier to breathe.
- Drinking plenty of fluids may help loosen a tight cough and relieve nasal congestion.
- Gargling with warm salt water or taking throat lozenges can soothe a sore throat.
- Placing petroleum jelly (Vaseline®) inside your nostrils can help relieve a raw nose.
- Saline nasal spray can help ease nasal congestion.
- Acetaminophen (Tylenol®) can relieve headache and fever.
- Dextromethorphan is a cough suppressant that is present in many cough medicines and multi-symptom cold remedies. It can help relieve a bothersome cough.
- Some people find oral decongestants like pseudoephedrine (Sudafed®) helpful for relieving nasal congestion. Other people find them ineffective, or are bothered by the side effects such as loss of appetite, jitteriness, and trouble sleeping.
- Some people find decongestant nose drops and sprays such as Afrin® helpful for congestion. Others find these products too irritating. They should not be used for longer than 3 days, since prolonged use can actually worsen congestion.
- Antihistamines like diphenhydramine (Benadryl®) may help relieve runny nose and watery eyes. However, they can also cause a dry nose and drowsiness. In fact, diphenhydramine causes so much drowsiness that it is also sold as a sleep-aid.





There are also many combination cold remedies that treat a variety of symptoms. Look for a product that treats only the symptoms that you have. This will help to reduce your risk of side effects.

You should also know which active ingredients are in any medication that you take. Be sure that you don't take the same active ingredient in two different forms.

All medicines can cause side effects. Be sure to read and follow the directions on the label.

None of these remedies prevent, cure, or even shorten the time you have a cold. However, some people find these remedies useful in reducing cold symptoms.

Ask your doctor or pharmacist if you have questions.

Remember

- Head colds and chest colds are common. They are caused by viruses and are spread through physical contact or by inhaling infected droplets.
- Apart from getting enough rest, there is nothing you can do to speed your recovery. In particular, antibiotics do not cure colds or help you get better sooner.
- Taking antibiotics can cause side effects and may increase your risk of getting a resistant infection. It may also contribute to the growing problem of bacterial resistance.
- While waiting for your cold to go away, there are things that you can try to relieve your symptoms, see "Treating Your Symptoms" section.
- All medicines can cause side effects, and you should take only those medicines that relieve your symptoms.
- Talk with your health care provider if you have concerns or questions.

Read labels carefully and ask questions if you are not sure.

