



## Cold Facts

### Does getting wet or chilled cause a cold?

No! Many different types of viruses, which are present in your nose and throat, cause colds. You are more likely to get colds or other infections when you don't get enough sleep, eat poorly, or spend time with people who have colds. These conditions can reduce your resistance to infection, making it more likely for you to get sick. Getting wet won't necessarily give you a cold, since the cold virus must also be present.

### Can I get a prescription from the doctor to get rid of my cold?

Colds are ailments that you can treat effectively by yourself. There are no medical cures or antibiotics to speed up the healing process of a cold. Viral infections do not improve with treatment by penicillin or other antibiotics. A "penicillin shot" for a cold or allergy with cold-like symptoms is not useful and can lead to a possible drug reaction. Certain medications may help relieve symptoms while your body's immune system fights the cold virus.

### What are the symptoms of a cold?

Viral upper respiratory infection (the common cold) usually includes some combination of the following symptoms: sore throat, runny nose, coughing, stuffy or congested nose, hoarseness, swollen glands, muscle aches and fever. One symptom usually starts off the cold and another (usually hoarseness or cough) may remain after the others have subsided.

### Do cold symptoms follow a pattern?

Yes. The symptoms appear from 1-3 days after the virus takes hold in your body. But other people can catch your cold even before you experience symptoms, which is one reason why colds are hard to prevent. The first indication of the infection is usually scratchiness or tickling in the throat. Within a few hours, your nose becomes stuffy and you have general feelings of discomfort and illness and you may start sneezing. Within 48 hours, your cold is fully developed. Each of the many viruses that cause upper respiratory infection has a slightly different incubation period, group of symptoms and duration. Most colds last anywhere from 4-14 days. The color of phlegm or mucus does not always indicate bacterial infection and need for antibiotics. The green or yellow color is from dead white blood cells and other debris.

### What can I do for my cold?

- **Rest** - Rest and sleep more than usual during this time. This is especially important in the first 72 hours. Getting 8-10 hours of sleep each night gives your body a better opportunity to combat the cold viruses. Exercise should be withheld for the first 48-72 hours to allow your body to fight off the virus.
- **Fluids** - Drink plenty of liquids. To be sure you get enough each day, drink at least one ounce of water for every 1 kg. or 2 lbs. of body weight. Fluids help to keep the mucus more liquid and easier to clear out, and help to prevent complications such as bronchitis and ear infections.
- **Broth or chicken soup** - excellent when you have a cold because they soothe your throat, or you can try juices. Alcohol and drinks containing caffeine in large quantities are not the best fluid replacement since they can mask dehydration.
- **Stop Smoking** - Smoke irritates the bronchial passages, prolonging the cold symptoms. Refrain from smoking if at all possible.
- **Steam** - Take hot, steamy showers to relieve congestion in the chest and nasal passages. If you can afford it, buy a cool mist vaporizer to add moisture to the air in your bedroom.
- **Gargle** - Gargle with warm salt water to reduce the sore throat pain. Put ½ teaspoon table salt in an 8 oz. glass of warm water and gargle every 2-4 hours as needed.
- **Diet** - Unless your provider has advised a particular diet, you may safely eat whatever you want - but it is wise to eat small, frequent meals. Choosing simple, nutritious food will ensure that your diet remains well balanced in essential vitamins and nutrients, despite your illness. An herbal remedy like Echinacea may be helpful if taken within the first 24 hours of developing cold symptoms. Vitamin C may shorten the duration of a cold. The evidence that zinc lozenges shorten the duration of a cold is very limited.
- **Fresh Air** - When you are ill, it may help you to feel more comfortable if a window is left slightly open. This will ensure that the room is properly ventilated and will clear the air of unpleasant odors. As long as the room remains reasonably warm and free of drafts, a daily dose of fresh air can sometimes do wonders.

## When should I seek professional advice?

These symptoms warrant a clinic visit:

- High fever - If your temperature rises above 101 degrees or if you have a fever over 100 degrees for more than three days.
- Unusual discharge - If discharge from nose or throat is rusty, greenish-yellow and has a distinct odor.
- Long Duration - If your symptoms last longer than 14 days.
- Extreme discomfort - If you have intense chest pain or shortness of breath.
- Significant pain - In one or both ears.
- Sore throat - For more than 3 days.
- Chronic respiratory problems (i.e., asthma, emphysema) - Seek medical care early.

## What can I do to help prevent colds?

Since colds are caused by so many different viruses, the immunities you develop to one virus won't protect you against other cold viruses. While there are no sure ways to prevent a cold, the following precautions may help you to avoid catching a cold.

- Wash your hands frequently; this is the best defense.
- Stay away from people who have colds, especially when they sneeze or cough. Most colds are picked up either by hand-to-hand contact, or by inhaling the infected droplets from a cough or sneeze.
- Eat a well balanced diet and make sure you get enough sleep to keep up your resistance.
- Add moisture to your room by using a vaporizer, humidifier, or even putting trays of water on radiators to increase your body's ability to fight infection. When the air is very dry (less than 30% moisture), the mucous membranes tend to dry out. Without normal drainage, sinuses, middle ears and bronchi may become infected.
- Taking Echinacea daily to "prevent" a cold is both costly and ineffective!

## References

Cecil's textbook of Medicine, 21st ed., (2000)

Clinician's Guide to Holistic Medicine, Anderson (2001)

If you are a registered University of Illinois student and you have questions or concerns, or need to make an appointment, please call: **Dial-A-Nurse at 333-2700**

If you are concerned about any difference in your treatment plan and the information in this handout, you are advised to contact your health care provider.

Visit the McKinley Health Center Web site at: <http://www.mckinley.uiuc.edu>