

## How do colds spread?

In general, a person becomes contagious from a few days before their symptoms begin until all of their symptoms have gone. This means most people will be infectious for around two weeks.

You can catch the virus from an infectious person by:

- touching an object or surface contaminated by infected droplets and then touching your mouth, nose or eyes
- touching the skin of someone who has the infected droplets on their skin and then touching your mouth, nose or eyes
- inhaling tiny droplets of fluid that contain the cold virus – these are launched into the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes

Colds spread most easily among groups of people in constant close contact, such as families and children in school or day care facilities. A number of different viruses can cause a cold, so it's possible to have several colds one after the other, as each one may be caused by a different virus.

## How can I stop a cold spreading?

You can take some simple steps to help prevent the spread of a cold:

- **wash your hands regularly** , particularly before touching your nose or mouth and before handling food
- **always sneeze and cough into tissues** – this will help prevent the virus-containing droplets from your nose and mouth entering the air, where they can infect others; you should throw away used tissues immediately and wash your hands
- **clean surfaces regularly** to keep them free of germs
- **use your own cup, plates, cutlery and kitchen utensils**
- **don't share towels or toys with someone who has a cold**



# The Common Cold

## Symptoms

**The symptoms of a cold usually develop within a few days of becoming infected.**

The main symptoms include:

- a sore throat
- a blocked or runny nose
- sneezing
- a cough
- a hoarse voice
- generally feeling unwell

Less common symptoms of a cold include:

- a high temperature (fever) – this is usually about 37-39C
- a headache
- earache – severe earache may be a sign of a middle ear infection
- muscle pain
- loss of taste and smell
- mild irritation of your eyes
- a feeling of pressure in your ears and face

The symptoms are usually at their worst during the first two to three days, before they gradually start to improve. In adults and older children, they usually last about 7 to 10 days, but can last longer. A cough in particular can last for two or three weeks.

## Is it a cold or flu?

It can sometimes be difficult to tell if you have a cold or something potentially more serious such as flu, as the symptoms can be quite similar. The main differences are:

### Flu symptoms

- come on quickly
- usually include a headache, fever and aching muscles
- make you feel too unwell to continue your usual activities

### Cold symptoms

- come on gradually
- mainly affect your nose and throat
- are fairly mild, so you can still get around and are usually well enough to go to work

## When to visit your GP

Colds are generally mild and shortlived, so there's usually no need to see your GP if you think you have one. Speak to a pharmacist if you want advice about treating a cold at home. You only really need to see your GP if:

- your symptoms persist for more than three weeks
- your symptoms get suddenly worse
- you have breathing difficulties
- you develop symptoms of complications of a cold, such as chest pain or coughing up bloodstained mucus

It might also be a good idea to see your GP if you're concerned about your baby or an elderly person, or if you have a long-term illness such as a lung condition. You can also phone NHS 111 for advice.

## What to do

There's no cure for a cold, but you can look after yourself at home by:

- resting, drinking plenty of fluids and eating healthily
- taking over-the-counter painkillers, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen, to reduce any fever or discomfort
- using decongestant sprays or tablets to relieve a blocked nose
- trying remedies such as gargling salt water and sucking on menthol sweets

Many painkillers and decongestants are available from pharmacies without a prescription. They're generally safe for older children and adults to take, but might not be suitable for babies, young children, pregnant women, people with certain underlying health conditions, and those taking certain other medications. Speak to a pharmacist if you're unsure.

### Other remedies

**Gargling and menthol sweets:** Some people find gargling with salt water and sucking on menthol sweets can help relieve a sore throat and blocked nose.

**Vapour rubs:** Vapour rubs can help babies and young children breathe more easily when they have a cold. Apply the rub to your child's chest and back. Don't apply it to their nostrils because this could cause irritation and breathing difficulties.

**Nasal saline drops:** Nasal saline (salt water) drops can help relieve a blocked nose in babies and young children.

**Vitamin and mineral supplements:** There is some evidence to suggest that taking zinc supplements within a day of the symptoms starting will speed up recovery from a cold and reduce the severity of symptoms.

## Cost to the NHS

The NHS spends around £2 billion a year on GP appointments for conditions, such as coughs and colds, which people can safely and effectively treat at home with over-the-counter medicines.