

AHRQ Safety Program for Telemedicine: Improving Antibiotic Use

The Common Cold – Patient Guide for Children and Adults

What is the “common cold”?

- Colds can be caused by a large number of viruses
- Even though colds are not caused by bacteria, they can still cause people to feel pretty miserable
- Some symptoms from colds include watery eyes, a runny or stuffy nose, sneezing, a scratchy or sore throat, fever, muscle pain, cough, and feeling very tired
- Cold viruses spread in three ways: through the air, through contact with other people who have a cold, and on surfaces that have been touched by people with colds
- You can limit your chance of developing a cold by:
 - Washing your hands often
 - Avoiding close contact with people who are sick
- You can limit the chance of spreading a cold by:
 - Washing your hands often with soap/water or hand sanitizer
 - Coughing or sneezing into a tissue or your elbow
 - Wearing a mask when you are sick and around other people
 - Staying home from work, school, or daycare when symptomatic, if feasible



What should I do to feel better?

- You can't make colds go away faster, but you can treat the symptoms. Some suggestions include:
 - Taking ibuprofen (commonly called Motrin®) or acetaminophen (commonly called Tylenol®) for pain relief according to their instructions, unless your healthcare provider suggests not taking them; store brands (e.g., CVS brand) are just as good as name brands (e.g., Motrin)
 - To help a sore throat, gargle with water, take cough drops (generally wait until a child is at least 6 years old), take about ½ a teaspoon to 1 teaspoon of honey every 2 hours or so (do not give honey to children under 1 year of age), and/or drink warm tea
 - Get plenty of rest, drink lots of water, and avoid smoking

What is the role of antibiotics?

- Antibiotics can kill bacteria but not viruses
- Antibiotics can have side effects like rashes, diarrhea, or yeast infections
- Taking antibiotics will not help you feel better faster and might actually make you feel worse

When will I feel better?

- Most colds last 1 to 2 weeks, but sometimes a cough can last for several weeks
- Although you may not feel well, the common cold usually does not cause serious illness

Contact your healthcare provider immediately if:

- You do not feel better after 10 days
- You develop a high fever (above 102 degrees Fahrenheit), trouble breathing, trouble swallowing, have shortness of breath, confusion, a bad headache, continued pain in your face, severe weakness, a new rash, or any other symptoms that are concerning to you

This document is intended to provide health-related information so that you may be better informed. It is not a substitute for your healthcare provider's medical advice and should not be relied upon for treatment for specific medical conditions.



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