

# AHRQ Safety Program for Telemedicine: Improving Antibiotic Use

## Viral Upper Respiratory Tract Infection (the “Common Cold”) – Clinician Guide

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### Diagnosis

- Viral upper respiratory tract infections (URIs) or “the common cold” are generally caused by viruses
- Presents with symptoms such as rhinorrhea, sneezing, sinus congestion, sore throat, cough, low-grade fever, headache, and fatigue
- Occurs throughout the year
- Color of nasal discharge does not differentiate a viral infection from a bacterial one
- History and physical examination should focus on identifying alternative diagnoses:
  - Potential bacterial diagnoses: sinusitis, streptococcal pharyngitis, bacterial pneumonia, etc.
  - Exacerbations of chronic medical conditions: asthma, heart failure, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, etc.
  - Recurrent or chronic symptoms: allergic or seasonal rhinitis

### Treatment

- Antibiotics are not indicated for the treatment of the common cold<sup>1</sup>
- Patients should be advised to rest and stay hydrated
- Consider the following treatments for symptom management in adults and children  $\geq 6$  years of age:<sup>2-6</sup>
  - Analgesics (acetaminophen and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs): help reduce fever and pain
  - Systemic decongestants: may decrease nasal congestion
- Intranasal decongestants (which should not be used for more than 5 days), oral decongestants, antihistamine-decongestant combinations, and antihistamine-decongestant-analgesic combinations—have only a limited benefit
- The American Academy of Pediatrics does not recommend cough and cold medicines for children younger than 6 years of age and does not generally recommend cough and cold medicines for children 6–12 years because of reports of harm, including apnea and serious overdoses<sup>7-9</sup>
- Consider the following treatments for symptom management in children:
  - Honey: for sore throat (ONLY for children over 1 year of age)<sup>10</sup>
  - Cool-mist humidifier: for sore throat and congestion
  - Nasal saline drops and bulb suctioning for infants
- There are no strong data for or against echinacea, zinc, or vitamin C for the treatment or prevention of common colds; while it is not clear if these treatments help, they are generally unlikely to cause harm<sup>11-13</sup>

### Prevention

- Common cold viruses are spread by hand contact and droplets
- To avoid transmission to others, encourage frequent hand washing, cough and sneeze into a tissue or into the arm rather than the hand, wear a face mask, and avoid touching the face
- The incubation period for most viral causes of the common cold is 1–3 days and patients may be infectious as long as symptoms are present

### Followup

- Symptoms usually last about 1 week and up to 2 weeks; dry cough may last up to 3 weeks and sometimes even longer<sup>1</sup>
- Patients should be instructed to seek in person medical care if symptoms have not improved after 10 days or if they develop a high fever (above 102 °F), confusion, lethargy, difficulty breathing or swallowing, severe headache, pain in the face or forehead, or severe fatigue



## References

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