

Common Cold – Self Care

(Cough, Fever, Nasal Congestion, Sore Throat)

Upper respiratory infections or colds are an inflammation of the upper respiratory tract caused by many different virus strains that cannot be cured by antibiotics. Most colds last for 4-5 days. While there is no cure for the common cold, over-the-counter medications may reduce your cold symptoms. Colds are spread from person to person through coughs, sneezes, and mucus on a person's hands. You can pick up the virus from books, towels, door handles, etc. that people with a cold have touched. Colds may last in diminishing severity for 2 to 4 weeks.

Is it a Cold or is it the Flu?

Different viruses cause the cold and the flu. Cold and flu symptoms are similar but have different intensity levels. A cold usually begins with minor sniffing or sneezing, while the flu hits you all at once. A cold rarely moves into the lungs, but the flu can cause pneumonia. Fatigue and muscle aches are more severe with the flu. It is important to determine if you have a cold or something more severe.

Self Care for Colds

Below are recommendations for self-care for four of the most common cold symptoms – fever, cough, sore throat, and nasal congestion. Also included is advice to help you decide when to seek medical care. University of Rochester students in need of medical care should call the University Health Service (275-2662) to schedule an appointment.

Symptom #1: Fever

A fever helps fight infection by creating an environment that is less conducive to the growth of bacterial and viral organisms. Normal body temperature is thought to range from 97⁰ - 100⁰ F.

There are many factors that can increase your temperature besides illness, such as hormones, hot weather, and exercise. If you have ruled out other factors other than illness that can cause a fever, it is then important to determine if you are dehydrated or if your fever is dangerously high. Since a fever is one of your body's natural healing mechanisms, you may not want to reduce it unless you are uncomfortable or it is too high.

Self-Care for a Fever

- Drink 8 oz. of fluids (water, fruit juice, soup, etc.) every few hours to replace fluids lost through “invisible” perspiration.
- Take a shower with lukewarm water. This will increase evaporation and help the body to naturally cool itself. Place a cool washcloth over forehead and/or behind neck.
- Even if you feel cold, do not bundle up in heavy clothes or blankets. This conserves heat and inhibits the body's ability to decrease its temperature.
- Take ibuprofen (Advil®) or acetaminophen (Tylenol®) as directed.
- Watch for signs of dehydration. Early symptoms include dry mouth, sticky saliva, and reduced urine output with dark color.

Seek Medical Care if...

- You have a fever of 101⁰ or higher that persists.
- The fever lasts more than three days.
- The fever appears after starting a new medication.
- The fever is accompanied by a rash, severe headache, stiff neck, marked irritability, or confusion.
- The fever is accompanied by severe back pain, abdominal pain, or painful urination.

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- The fever is accompanied by a cough with green or brown sputum or shortness of breath.
- You feel dehydrated.

Symptom #2: COUGH

Coughing is your body's way of trying to clear the lungs and airways. There are two major types of coughs: (1) productive (brings up mucus or phlegm) and (2) non-productive (dry cough without any mucus)

Coughs may be caused by viral or bacterial infections, allergies, or by irritants, especially cigarettes. It is important to determine if your cough is caused by an infection, an allergy, or an irritant. A fever and thick, colored mucus may be signs of a bacterial infection, which should be treated immediately.

Self-Care for a Productive Cough

- Drink 8 oz. of fluids (water, fruit juice, soup, etc.) every few hours to replace fluids lost through “invisible” perspiration.
- Drink plenty of liquids and use a vaporizer or hot shower steam to loosen congestion and thin mucus.
- Take an over-the-counter expectorant, such as Robitussin®. Do not take a cough suppressant to suppress a cough so much that you can no longer bring up mucus.
- Stay away from smoky environments.

Self-Care for a Non-Productive Cough:

- Drink plenty of fluids. Hot beverages, especially those with honey, soothe the throat.
- Take an over-the-counter cough suppressant with dextromethorphan.
- Take a decongestant, such as Sudafed®, if you have post-nasal drip (which you can feel at the back of your throat).
- Suck on cough drops, lozenges, or hard candy to soothe and moisten a dry, irritated throat.
- Elevate your head with extra pillows at night.

Seek Medical Care if...

- You have a fever of 101⁰ or higher for more than two days.
- You cough up bloody, brown, or green mucus.
- You experience shortness of breath or severe chest pains.
- The cough lasts longer than ten days to two weeks.

Symptom #3: Sore Throat

The two main causes for the common sore throat are:

- **Viral infections** are most common, with less severe symptoms, and can be treated with self-care.
- **Bacterial infections** are the more serious cause of sore throats, such as strep throat. Sore throats caused by bacterial infections should be examined immediately and treated with antibiotics.

Symptoms for bacterial infections include a sore throat that persists for three to four days, a fever of 101⁰ or higher, swollen glands in the neck, and white or yellow patches on the tonsils or the back of the throat.

Self-Care for a Minor Sore Throat

- Drink 8 oz. of fluids (water, fruit juice, soup, etc.) every few hours to replace fluids lost through “invisible” perspiration and help loosen mucus secretions in your throat for a more productive cough. Hot beverages, especially those with honey, soothe the throat.

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- Gargle with warm salt water every few hours.
- Eat and drink cold foods and liquids.
- Suck on cough drops, hard candy, or lozenges medicated with menthol, benzocaine, or camphor.
- Stay away from smoky environments.
- Avoid alcoholic or caffeinated products since they increase the likelihood of becoming dehydrated.
- Breathe in moist heat from a vaporizer or shower.
- Take ibuprofen (Advil®) or acetaminophen (Tylenol®) as directed. *Do not use aspirin.*

Seek Medical Care if...

- You have a fever of 101⁰ or higher.
- White or yellow patches appear on your tonsils.
- A skin rash occurs with your sore throat.
- You have great difficulty breathing or swallowing.
- You have hoarseness or enlarged lymph nodes that persist for more than ten days.
- You have chills or cough up green or yellow mucus.
- A mild sore throat lasts more than two weeks.
- You have been exposed to strep recently.

Symptom #4: Nasal Congestion

Nasal congestion has many causes: a cold, the flu, other infections, or an allergy to food, chemicals, or other substances like pollen or dust. If your nasal congestion is caused by an allergen, the best way to clear up congestion is to avoid the allergen. If allergy symptoms persist for a few weeks, you may want to seek medical attention. Otherwise, nasal congestion may clear up on its own.

You can help alleviate the discomfort of nasal congestion. Self-care for nasal congestion due to a cold is important not only because it helps relieve discomfort, but also because it helps prevent the spread of infection to other people.

Self-Care for Nasal Congestion

- Drink 8 oz. of fluids (water, hot tea with lemon, juice, soup, etc.) every few hours.
- Breathe in moist heat from a vaporizer or shower to break up congestion.
- Get extra rest.
- Stay away from smoky environments.
- Using saline nasal sprays may help clear your nose and sinuses.
- Decongestants, which contain active ingredients such as pseudoephedrine (Sudafed®), can dry up mucus in the head, chest, and nose while shrinking mucus membranes and opening nasal passages.
- Avoid caffeinated products while taking decongestants since both are stimulants.
- If you have a cold, it may be contagious. Cover your mouth when sneezing to avoid the spread of infection.

Seek Medical Care if...

- You have a fever of 101⁰ or higher for more than two days.
- The congestion does not clear within a few weeks.
- You cough up or sneeze up mucus that is green, brown, or bloody.
- Your sinuses are tender and painful.
- You have allergy symptoms that persist for more than three weeks.

Avoid Taking Aspirin

Children and young adults should avoid taking aspirin for cold symptoms. Aspirin, which contains salicylates, has been implicated in the development of Reye Syndrome, an uncommon, yet serious complication of viral illnesses, such as colds. Tylenol® is recommended.

Treating Viral Infections

If you are diagnosed as having an illness caused by a virus, you will not be given an antibiotic. Antibiotic treatment does not cure viral infections and, in fact, may be harmful if given when not needed.

Most viral infections last 7-10 days. The treatments below will help you feel better while your body's own defenses are combating the virus.

- Rest until you feel in better health. Getting eight to ten hours of sleep when you are sick is helpful.
- Drink at least four 8-oz. glasses of water per day.
- Gargle to soothe a sore throat. A gargle can be made with ½ tsp. of table salt and 8 oz. of warm water.
- Use a cool mist humidifier to relieve congestion and moisten dry mucus membranes.
- Use a steam vaporizer to promote drainage of nasal sinuses.

Seek Medical Care for Viral Infections if...

- Symptoms do not improve in seven days, or
- You have other concerns

Over-The-Counter (Otc) Medications

With so many medications to choose from when you have a cold or the flu, choosing the best product can be tough. Most cold symptoms can be relieved with over-the-counter (OTC) medications. Many medications you may need can be purchased from UHS, as well as several other locations both on and off campus. At UHS, you can pay by check or charge the cost to your tuition bill.

Most cold and flu preparations contain a combination of ingredients, so it is important to read the labels of each product. Sometimes, if you take more than one product, you may be getting a double dose of an active ingredient and/or not getting enough of another.

Tips for Taking OTC Medications

- Check the package of tampering and expiration dates. Do not purchase products with a broken safety seal or with past expiration dates.
- Use OTC medications for temporary use only, unless instructed otherwise by your primary care provider.
- Read the entire label on the package. It is important to know the contents, warning, and dosage directions of each medication.
- Antibiotics do not kill cold or flu viruses or help aches, pains, or fever. Use OTC medications in these instances.