PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Managing Your Cold

This information explains how you can manage your cold symptoms.

Colds are infections that are usually caused by a virus. Colds are also known as upper respiratory infections.

Signs and symptoms of colds

You may have 1 or more of these signs of a cold:

- A fever of 100.4° F (38° C) or higher
- Sneezing
- A stuffy or runny nose.
  - After 2 to 3 days, your mucus may change to a white, yellow, or green color. This is normal and does not mean you need an antibiotic.
- Sore throat
- Cough or chest tightness
- Post-nasal drip (mucus dripping down your throat)
- Mild headache
- Mild body aches

Some symptoms such as a runny or stuffy nose, and cough, can last for up to 10 to 14 days. These symptoms should improve over time.

Difference between colds and flu

It can be hard to tell the difference between having a cold and having the flu because the symptoms are similar.

Common symptoms of the flu include a high fever, cough, and headache or body aches. Having the flu doesn't always cause a sore throat and a runny nose. Symptoms of the flu can also start quickly, while cold symptoms start more slowly.

If you think you have the flu, see your healthcare provider. They can diagnose the flu and prescribe you antiviral medications to help.

Treatment for colds

Since most colds are caused by a virus, taking antibiotics won't help you feel better. Antibiotics only treat infections that are caused by bacteria such as strep throat or whooping cough.

A good way to treat a cold is by getting enough rest. Adults should get about 7 to 9 hours of sleep every night.

It's also important to drink enough liquids. Try to drink 8 (8-ounce) glasses of non-caffeinated liquids (such as water or herbal tea) every day.

Managing cold symptoms

Sore throat

To help a sore throat, you can:

- Suck on ice chips, popsicles, or lozenges (such as Halls®, Luden's®, or Ricola®)
    - Do not give lozenges to children younger than 4 years old
- Use a sore throat numbing spray containing benzocaine or phenol (such as Cepacol® or Chloraseptic®).
- Drink warm liquids, such as tea or soups.

- Gargle with salt water.
    - To make the gargling solution, mix 1 tablespoon of salt with 8 ounces of warm water. Gargle as needed then spit out the solution. Don't swallow it.

Cough or chest tightness

To help with a cough or tightness in your chest, you can:

- Add more humidity to the air. To do this, use a clean humidifier or cool mist vaporizer in the rooms where you spend most of your time.
    - You can also breathe in steam from a hot shower, bath, or bowl of hot water. Sit with young children in a bathroom filled with steam from a running shower.
- Suck on lozenges or hard candies.
    - Do not give lozenges to children younger than 4 years old.
- Add pasteurized (not raw) honey to a warm drink, such as tea.
    - Do not give honey to children younger than 1 year old.

Stuffy nose or sinus pain or pressure

To help ease a stuffy nose, sinus pain, or pressure, you can:

- Put a warm compress over your nose and forehead.
- Use an over-the-counter decongestant medication, such as pseudoephedrine or phenylephrine (Sudafed®, Mucinex®). If you have a heart condition, or if you take prescription medications, ask your pharmacist if it's safe to take cold medications.
- Use saline nasal spray.
    - Use a rubber suction bulb to clear mucus for young children,
- Add more humidity to the air. You can breathe in steam from a bowl of hot water or shower.
    - Sit with young children in a bathroom filled with steam from a running shower.

Ear pain

If you have ear pain, you can put a warm, moist cloth over the ear that hurts. If the pain is very bad or lasts more than 2 days, call your healthcare provider.

Taking medication

Adults

You can take over-the-counter cough and cold medications (such as DayQuil™, Theraflu®). They won't cure your cold or help you get better faster, but they can help with your symptoms. Make sure to follow the instructions on the label and talk to your doctor or pharmacist about all the medications that you're taking before you take a cold medication.

Don't take more than 1 medication that has acetaminophen (Tylenol®) in it. Acetaminophen is a pain reliever that is also found in many cold medications, including DayQuil and Theraflu. Too much acetaminophen can cause liver damage.

Don't take more than 1,000 milligrams (mg) of acetaminophen at 1 time or more than 4,000 mg a day. Talk with your doctor or pharmacist before taking medication with acetaminophen if you have liver disease or if you're 65 or older.

Children

Always read over-the-counter medicine product labels before giving medicine to children. Some over-the-counter medicines are not recommended for young children.

- Children younger than 6 months: only give acetaminophen (Tylenol ®)
- Children 6 months or older: it is OK to give acetaminophen (Tylenol ®) or ibuprofen (Motrin®)
- Never give children aspirin. This can cause Reye's syndrome, which is a very serious but rare illness that can harm the liver and brain.

- Over-the-counter cough and cold medicines are not recommended for children younger than 6 years old. This can result in serious and sometimes life-threatening side effects.
- Young children can have fever-reducing medicines. Contact your healthcare provider or pharmacist about the correct dose. Read and follow all directions.

How to prevent colds

- Stay up to date on immunizations, such as the flu vaccine.
- Practice good hygiene, such as washing your hands, and covering your mouth when you cough or sneeze. This can help prevent the spread of colds.
- Take steps to improve your indoor air ventilation. This can reduce the number of virus particles in the air.

Call your healthcare provider if you:

- Have a fever of 100.4° F (38° C) or higher
- Have shaking chills,
- Have a loss of appetite (not feeling hungry)
- Have trouble breathing
- Have a lung disease, such as emphysema (lung disease) or asthma
- Have a cough that lasts longer than 10 days
- Have chest pain when you cough
- Cough up blood
- Have a cold and a weakened immune system
- Have a cold and are getting chemotherapy

Visit your healthcare provider for any symptom that is concerning.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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