

MEDfacts

An Educational Health Series From National Jewish Health®



UPPER RESPIRATORY INFECTIONS (COLDS) and ACUTE BRONCHITIS

UPPER RESPIRATORY INFECTIONS

What are Colds?

Colds are viral, not bacterial infections of the upper respiratory tract.

Symptoms can include:

- a scratchy, sore throat
- sneezing
- nasal discharge, which is watery at first, then thick
- tiredness
- low grade fever <100°F
- an overall sick feeling.

Colds are highly contagious. They are spread through touching contaminated surfaces, coughing and sneezing.

Some people are more prone to colds than others. A child in preschool may "catch" as many as four to eight colds per year. Generally, there is an increased frequency of colds during fall and winter months because of closer, indoor contact with other people.

What Causes Colds?

Over 200 different viruses can cause a cold. Some of the common viruses include: rhinovirus, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), corona virus, para-influenza and influenza.

What is the Course of a Cold?

A cold usually runs its course without complications in seven to ten days. If you have cold symptoms lasting longer than two weeks, report this to your health care provider. Also, report symptoms if nasal discharge is yellow or green after 10 days or has an odor. This may mean you have a sinus infection, and could require antibiotics.

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How are Colds Treated?

Because there is no cure for the common cold, treatment is aimed at relieving symptoms.

- Get plenty of rest and drink plenty of fluids.
- Saline (salt water) nose drops or sprays may be helpful in relieving nasal congestion, especially for infants.
- "Over-the-counter" decongestant sprays can relieve symptoms for a short time, but should not be used for more than three days. Longer use can lead to rebound congestion with more symptoms of congestion.
- Oral (tablet or syrup) decongestants may also relieve nasal symptoms.
- Antihistamines in tablet or syrup form may be of some benefit in reducing mucus production.
- Aspirin is not recommended for children under 18 and for people with asthma. Ask your health care provider about taking acetaminophen (Tylenol®) for relieving pain and fever.
- Antibiotics and vitamin C are **not** helpful in relieving symptoms of the common cold.

How can Colds be Prevented?

Frequent good handwashing and use of disposable tissues may help decrease the spread of cold germs. **In fact, good handwashing may be the single most effective way to reduce the spread of infections!** Experimental vaccines have not proven successful.

ACUTE BRONCHITIS

What is Acute Bronchitis?

Acute bronchitis is swelling and inflammation in the airways of the lungs. It is often caused by an infection. Rarely, acute bronchitis can be caused by exposure to chemicals or toxic gases.

Symptoms can include:

- cough with sputum production
- chest discomfort
- fever
- extreme tiredness.

What Causes Acute Bronchitis?

Unlike colds, viruses and bacteria can cause acute bronchitis. In children, viruses are the most common infectious cause of bronchitis. It is important to note that severe cases of bronchitis may progress to pneumonia.

How is Acute Bronchitis Treated?

A health care provider can determine if acute bronchitis is due to a virus or bacteria.

- An antibiotic is prescribed if you have a bacterial bronchitis. If you have a viral bronchitis, however, an antibiotic may not be prescribed. This is because an antibiotic is not effective against a viral infection and unnecessary use of antibiotics can lead to "drug-resistant" bacteria. Your health care provider may prescribe an

antibiotic if you have developed a secondary bacterial infection on top of the pre-existing viral infection. It is important that the antibiotic is the correct one to kill the specific bacteria of your infection.

- Additional medications may be prescribed to improve your breathing. Inhaled quick-relief (bronchodilator) medications are given if you have symptoms of wheezing or shortness of breath. Corticosteroid medications may be used to decrease swelling and inflammation in your airways.
- Avoiding tobacco smoke and other irritants, good nutrition with plenty of fluids, rest and medication are all important in your treatment plan.

What is the Course of Acute Bronchitis?

How long the acute bronchitis lasts is determined by your general state of health, your lung health, the virus or bacteria involved, ongoing exposure to tobacco smoke and how soon you get treatment.

Sometimes viral bronchitis can cause asthma-like symptoms. This is more common in people with a history of asthma or allergy. Asthma-like symptoms include a dry, hacking cough that lasts four to eight weeks or longer after the initial infection is over. The cough may develop with exposure to cold, dry air, smoke or dust. Inhaled quick-relief (bronchodilator) and corticosteroid medications may be prescribed for persistent or severe cases. Your health care provider can discuss your treatment plan and anticipated recovery time.

Acute bronchitis is different from chronic bronchitis, which develops from long-term irritation of the airways and is most often associated with smoking. Even people who inhale second-hand smoke are at risk for developing chronic bronchitis.

Can Acute Bronchitis be Prevented?

Just like a cold, frequent good handwashing and the use of disposable tissues can decrease the number of acute bronchitis infections. Avoiding tobacco smoke and other irritants is also important. Ask your health care provider about the yearly flu (influenza) vaccine.

Note: This information is provided to you as an educational service of LUNG LINE® (1-800-222-LUNG). It is not meant to be a substitute for consulting with your own physician.

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