

The Common Cold in Adults

This fact sheet helps you to know what is 'normal' and what you can expect to happen if you develop cold symptoms. It also tells you when you should become concerned and seek advice from a health professional.

Could it be Coronavirus?

It is still important to be mindful about coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms, which are the same for adults and children and can include the symptoms below. Many of these are similar to symptoms of illnesses such as colds and flu.

- A high temperature
- A new and continuous cough
- A loss or change to your sense of smell or taste
- Shortness of breath
- Feeling tired, or exhausted
- A headache
- A sore throat
- Loss of appetite
- Diarrhoea
- Feeling sick or being sick
- An aching body
- A blocked or runny nose

You should consult the advice specific to your area in the UK:

If you are in a high risk group, it is important that you read the appropriate sections and make contact with the recommended agencies if you have symptoms or queries.

For general advice on what to do if you have symptoms, or for further testing and vaccination information, please visit:

- NHS England: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>
- Northern Ireland NIDirect: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/coronavirus-covid-19>
- NHS Inform for Scotland: <https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/coronavirus-covid-19>
- NHS Wales 111: [https://111.wales.nhs.uk/encyclopaedia/c/article/coronavirus\(covid19\)/](https://111.wales.nhs.uk/encyclopaedia/c/article/coronavirus(covid19)/)

Useful facts about the common cold

What is the common cold?

Mild viral infections can cause symptoms of the cold, including a blocked or runny nose, sneezing, cough, a sore throat, a slightly raised body temperature (fever) up to 39°C and feeling generally unwell.

How dangerous are colds?

Colds are harmless and in the vast majority of cases get better by themselves without any complications. If you have a long-term health problem (such as diabetes, heart disease or a lung condition) or a weakened immune system (for example due to chemotherapy) you may need to get advice from a member of your pharmacy team, or your GP.

How common are they?

Colds are very common, and adults get an average of 2-4 a year.

Are there any complications?

While the symptoms are unpleasant, the common cold is harmless. Complications, such as chest, ear and other infections, are rare.

Will I need antibiotics?

Most colds get better on their own without treatment. Antibiotics don't work on viruses such as the common cold and may cause side effects.

Effect of smoking:

Cold symptoms such as coughing tend to be more severe if you smoke, and usually lasts longer. Consider quitting, you can talk to a member of your pharmacy team for advice on how to stop smoking.

What can I expect to happen?

Catching a cold: We can catch a cold by either breathing in droplets of fluid containing the cold virus (when someone sneezes), or by touching something that someone has sneezed on, and then touching our mouth or nose.

Symptoms: In adults and older children, cold symptoms last for about a week and a half, and in younger children for up to two weeks. Symptoms are usually worst in the first two to three days, before they gradually start to improve. Coughs may last up to three weeks.

There is no cure: We have no cure for the common cold. But while our bodies fight the infection, there are various ways of relieving our symptoms.

What can I do to help myself- now and in the future?

Simple measures: Get some rest until you feel better – we usually know when we're well enough to return to normal activities.

Diet and fluids: Drink plenty of fluids to replace those lost from sweating and a runny nose. Try to eat healthily, including at least five portions of fruit and vegetables every day if possible.

Over the counter medicines: Paracetamol, Ibuprofen or Aspirin can help reduce the symptoms of a cold. Always follow the manufacturer's instructions. Talk to a member of your pharmacy team about remedies that may help ease your symptoms.

When should I seek medical help?

Most colds are not serious and get better by themselves. Contact your surgery or NHS 111 in England & Wales, the Phone First Service in Northern Ireland or NHS24 in Scotland if:

- You develop a high temperature (above 39°C or 102.2°F), or you feel shivery;
- You feel confused or disorientated;
- You notice a sharp pain in your chest;
- You cough up blood;
- You find it difficult to breathe;
- Your symptoms last longer than three weeks;
- Your symptoms suddenly get worse.

Where can I find out more?

A member of your pharmacy team can help you with symptoms, otherwise more information is available here:

- <https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/common-cold/>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/common-cold/>
- <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/conditions/common-cold>
- <https://111.wales.nhs.uk/cold,common/>