

The common cold (adults)

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

Useful facts

- **What is the common cold?** Mild viral infections can cause symptoms of the cold, including a blocked and then 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 infections that in the vast majority of cases get better by themselves without any complications.
- **How common are they?** Colds are very common, and adults get an average of two to four colds 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 are ineffective for treating 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 the infection usually lasts longer.

What can I expect to happen?

- **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.
- **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.

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