FPSR Health Education- Common Cold

Common Cold

What is the common cold?

The common cold is one of the most common illnesses, leading to more doctor visits and absences from school and work than any other illness every year. It is estimated that during a one-year period, people in the U.S. will suffer one billion colds. Caused by a virus that inflames the membranes in the lining of the nose and throat, colds can be the result of more than 200 different viruses. However, among all of the cold viruses, the rhinoviruses and the coronaviruses cause the majority of colds.

When is "cold" season?

People are most likely to have colds during fall and winter, starting in late August or early September until March or April. The increased incidence of colds during the cold season may be attributed to the fact that more people are indoors and close to each other. In addition, many cold viruses thrive in low humidity, making the nasal passages drier and more vulnerable to infection.

What are the symptoms of the common cold?

The following are the most common symptoms of the common cold. However, each individual may experience symptoms differently. Symptoms may include:

- Stuffy, runny nose
- Scratchy, tickly throat
- Sneezing
- Watering eyes
- Low-grade fever
- Sore throat
- Mild hacking cough
- Achy muscles and bones
- Headache
- Mild fatigue
- Chills
- Watery discharge from the nose that thickens and turns yellow or green

Colds usually start two or three days after the virus enters the body and symptoms last from several days to several weeks.

The symptoms of the common cold may resemble other medical conditions. Always consult your physician for a diagnosis.

How does the common cold spread?

The common cold is highly contagious. It is often spread through airborne droplets that are coughed or sneezed into the air by the contagious person and then inhaled by another person. Colds can also be spread by hand-to-hand or hand-to-infected-surface contact, after which a person touches his/her face.

How is a cold different from the flu?

A cold and the flu (influenza) are two different illnesses. A cold is relatively harmless and usually clears up by itself after a period of time, although sometimes it may lead to a secondary infection, such as an ear infection. However, the flu can lead to complications, such as pneumonia and even death. What may seem like a cold, could, in fact, be the flu. Be aware of these differences:

- Cold
- Low or no fever
- Sometimes a headache
- Stuffy, runny nose
- Sneezing
- Mild, hacking cough
- Slight aches and pains
- Mild fatigue
- Sore throat
- Normal energy level
- Flu
- High fever
- Always a headache
- Clear nose
- Sometimes sneezing
- Cough, often becoming severe
- Often severe aches and pains
- Several weeks of fatigue
- Sometimes a sore throat
- Extreme exhaustion

Who is at greater risk of catching the common cold?

Children suffer more colds each year than adults, due to their immature immune systems and to the close physical contact with other children at school or daycare. In fact, the average child will have between 6 to 10 colds a year, while the average adult will get 2 to 4 colds a year. However, the average number of colds for children and adults will vary.

Preventing the Common Cold

The best way to avoid catching the common cold is to wash your hands frequently and avoid close contact with people who have colds. When around people with colds, do not touch your nose or eyes, because your hands may be contaminated with the virus.

People with colds should cough and sneeze in facial tissue and dispose of the tissue promptly, and then wash his/her hands immediately. In addition, cleaning surfaces with disinfectants that kill viruses can halt the spread of the common cold. Research has shown that rhinoviruses may survive up to three hours outside of the nasal mucosa.

How is the common cold diagnosed?

Most common colds are diagnosed based on reported symptoms. However, cold symptoms may be similar to certain bacterial infections, allergies, and other medical conditions. Always consult your physician for a diagnosis.

Treatment for the common cold:

Currently, there is no medication available to cure or shorten the duration of the common cold. However, the following are some treatments that may help to relieve some symptoms of the cold:

- Over-the-counter cold medications, such as decongestants and cough medicine
- Over-the-counter antihistamines (medication that helps dry up nasal secretions and suppress coughing)
- Rest
- Increased fluid intake
- Pain relievers for headache or fever
- Warm salt water gargling for sore throat
- Petroleum jelly for raw, chapped skin around the nose and lips
- Warm steam for congestion

Note: Because colds are caused by viruses, treatment with antibiotics is ineffective. Antibiotics are only effective when given to treat bacterial infections.

Do not give aspirin to a child who has fever without first contacting the child's physician. Aspirin, when given as treatment for viral illnesses in children, has been associated with Rey's Syndrome, a potentially serious or deadly disorder in children. Therefore, pediatricians and other healthcare providers recommend that aspirin (or any medication that contains aspirin) not be used to treat any viral illnesses (such as colds, the flu, and chickenpox) in children.

Complications from colds:

Colds can lead to secondary infections, including bacterial middle ear and sinus infections that may require treatment with antibiotics. When a cold is accompanied by a high fever, sinus pain, significantly

swollen glands, or a mucus-producing cough, a complication may be present that requires additional treatment.

Cold weather and colds:

Contrary to popular belief, cold weather or getting chilled does not cause a cold, according to the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID). However, more colds do occur during the cold season (early fall to late winter), which is probably due to a variety of factors, including:

- Schools are in session, increasing the risk for exposure to the virus
- People stay more indoors and are in closer proximity to each other
- Low humidity, causing dry nasal passages which are more susceptible to cold viruses