

Colds, Acute Bronchitis and “Flu”

Colds, bronchitis and the flu are the most common illnesses for which people seek medical care. Many people think (or have been told) that they need antibiotics for these illnesses. However, most of these illnesses are caused by viruses, not bacteria. Antibiotics do not kill viruses, which cause colds and the flu. They do not speed recovery from most bronchitis either, even when the bronchitis is caused by bacteria.

In the past, some doctors prescribed antibiotics for these illnesses and in many countries, people can obtain antibiotics without prescription. Health care officials worldwide are increasingly concerned about problems that can result when antibiotics are prescribed unnecessarily, such as:

- Side effects or serious allergic reactions.
- Antibiotic resistance: many bacteria can no longer be killed by antibiotics because the germs have developed defense mechanisms against the drugs.

THE COMMON COLD

Each year, most adults have at least one or two colds and most children have five to eight! More than 100 different viruses can cause colds. Symptoms include stuffy or runny nose cough, and sinus or throat pain. Fever, fatigue, and muscle and joint pains often occur. Symptoms may vary but they usually fade over five to 14 days.

Medicine for Colds

No medicines will cure a cold. However, several medicines can help you with the aches, pain, and fever: acetaminophen (e.g., Tylenol®) or ibuprofen (e.g., Motrin® or Advil).

What Else Should I Do for a Cold?

Get adequate rest, drink fluids and avoid passing on your illness to others (for example, don't share eating utensils and telephones and avoid close contact with others, especially while you are coughing). Recent scientific studies do not confirm benefit from over the counter cough and cold remedies.

Are Colds Different for Children?

Children tend to have more colds during the year. To help prevent colds:

- Wash hands frequently!
- Avoid bringing a child with a cold near other people.

- Offer your child plenty of fluids and healthy foods. There is no reason to limit dairy products.
- Never give your child aspirin for fever and aches. In children, aspirin given during viral illness may cause Reye Syndrome and liver failure. For aches and fever causing discomfort, give acetaminophen or ibuprofen.

ACUTE BRONCHITIS

Acute bronchitis is usually caused by viruses. Symptoms include cough with mucus, chest pain when breathing deeply, wheezing or breathlessness, fever, chills, headache, and sore muscles. The cough may last for several weeks or months. Acute bronchitis is more common and lasts longer in people who smoke or have asthma.

Medicines for Acute Bronchitis

Antibiotics usually do not cure acute bronchitis, even when bacteria are present. Thick or colored mucus does not indicate that antibiotics are needed. Inhaler medications (such as albuterol) may help clear mucus from the bronchial tubes, decrease wheezing and spasmodic coughing.

What Else Can I Do for Acute Bronchitis?

If you smoke, stop! Ask your health care provider for help with quitting. Avoid exposure to secondhand smoke. As with a cold, rest adequately, drink fluids and avoid passing on your illness to others. Don't share eating utensils and telephones, and avoid contact with others, especially while you are coughing or sneezing.

Is Bronchitis Different for Children?

Children do not get bronchitis as often as adults and their symptoms may differ. Instead of overt wheezing, a child may have a nagging, dry cough. Inhaler medications can be very useful to control this cough. Other recommendations for bronchitis in children are the same as for colds in children (see the description above).

INFLUENZA (FLU)

Most of what people commonly call “the flu” is actually a viral cold or bronchitis (see previous descriptions). In contrast, true influenza is caused by infection with a strain of influenza virus.

Influenza symptoms are distinctly different from bronchitis, beginning more abruptly severely, including chills and fever up to 105 degrees Fahrenheit, fatigue, headache, dry cough, muscle aches and sore throat. The fever may last three to five days, but fatigue and cough may linger for several weeks. Influenza is most common in winter and early spring (but so are many common cold viruses).

Medicines for Influenza

Antibiotics do not cure influenza. Antiviral drugs may shorten the length of illness when given during the first two days of symptoms. In the past, concerns over side effects of early anti-influenza drugs limited their use for most patients, but newer anti influenza drugs are safer. If you have influenza, your physician will discuss whether you should be treated with antiviral drugs. As with bronchitis, inhaler medications may be prescribed for wheezing.

Preventing Influenza

Flu shots prevent influenza and reduce symptoms caused by certain strains of influenza virus. Flu shots do not prevent most common respiratory illnesses. Flu shots are recommended for: anyone over 65 years old; persons with chronic heart or lung disease, suppressed immunity or diabetes; women who will be more than 14 weeks pregnant during influenza season (autumn and winter); nursing home residents; health care workers; those who care for or live with persons at high risk; and anyone interested in reducing their chances of contracting influenza.

What Else Can I Do for Influenza?

As with bronchitis, several medicines can help reduce the symptoms of influenza, including acetaminophen or ibuprofen for muscle aches and fever and inhalers for wheezing or spasmodic cough.

Is Influenza Different for Children?

Symptoms of influenza may be the same in children and adults, although it can appear as a simple upper respiratory illness or just a fever. In young infants, influenza can produce severe respiratory illness, including pneumonia and high fever. It is especially important to reduce high fever, temperature above 104 degrees Fahrenheit (40 degrees Celsius) to reduce the risk of seizures.

OVER THE-COUNTER MEDICINES FOR A COLD, BRONCHITIS OR THE FLU

Most over the counter medications formerly advertised for children are ineffective or potentially harmful. As noted above, you may treat a fever under 104 degrees Fahrenheit (40 degrees Celsius) if your child is uncomfortable but this is not required.

Honey for children over age one year: nighttime cough for children over one year old may be calmed with two teaspoons of honey. A recent study found that honey was more effective than over the counter cough syrups. Do brush your child's teeth after giving the honey. Don't let your child sleep with a bottle containing honey (this can cause tooth decay). Never give honey to a child under a year of age.

HERBAL THERAPIES OR VITAMINS FOR A COLD, BRONCHITIS OR FLU?

Many herbal therapies have been used for cold symptoms. Most have not undergone scientific testing to prove their effectiveness; others have undergone such tests but without convincing results. Herbal remedies are exempt from approval by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), so there is no requirement to prove safety and efficacy, as there is for over-the-counter and prescription medications. Below is a summary of the published scientific evidence about several herbal remedies and their effect on colds:

- **Echinacea:** studies show neither harm nor benefit.
- **Herbal tea:** containing peppermint leaf, cinnamon bark, safflower and ginger: studies show neither harm nor benefit.
- **Vitamin C:** studies show neither harm nor benefit. Avoid doses over 1,000 milligrams (mg).
- **Zinc lozenges:** studies are mixed, some showing benefit for cold symptoms but also a possible negative impact on sense of smell.

WHEN TO CALL YOUR HEALTH CARE PROVIDER

Since treatment for most colds, bronchitis and flu is largely self-care at home, you may not need to call your health care provider. Do call us if you experience any of the following:

- Fever over 102 degree Fahrenheit (38.9 degrees Celsius) if you are under 65 years old
- Fever over 100 degrees Fahrenheit (37.8 degrees Celsius) if you are 65 years or older, or if you have chronic heart or lung disease or diabetes
- Difficulty breathing, uncontrollable cough or chest pain
- Very red, sore throat with white patches. This may be a sign of strep infection, which is caused by bacteria and is treated with antibiotics. Note that most sore throats do not require antibiotics since they are caused by viruses, especially when they accompany other cold symptoms.
- Severe headache or pain in the sinuses (cheeks and forehead)
- Symptoms that worsen after five days or continue for more than 10 to 14 days

Aside from the analgesics listed below, the other agents listed here are not proven in scientific studies to be of benefit, but when used in standard doses are not harmful. Do not give them to children.

CLASS OF MEDICATION	GENERIC NAME	USES
Analgesics	acetaminophen, ibuprofen	relieve muscle aches and pains and reduce fever
Antitussives	dextromethorphan	cough suppressant; useful for a dry cough
Expectorants	guaifenesin	thins the mucus so it can be coughed up more easily
Nasal decongestant sprays	ephedrine, phenylephrine pseudoephedrine, oxymetazoline	shrinks swelling in nasal passages, must be used for fewer than five days to avoid rebound congestion
Oral decongestants	ephedrine, phenylephrine pseudoephedrine	reduce congestion in the nasal passages