

## Respiratory Infections (Colds)

The common cold is caused by any one of a large number of viruses and each cold is very likely due to infection from a different virus. That is why the same person may have so many different colds, and why the symptoms vary from one episode to another. Immunity is acquired as one grows older, with the number of subsequent colds fewer and often less severe.

Colds are most contagious during the early period when the cold is developing and during the first day or two after the symptoms have appeared. Colds are spread by personal contact more than by droplets, but droplets are also infectious to some degree. Viruses can also be transferred by touching contaminated objects that have been handled by infected persons, although once objects have been dried and cleaned the virus disappears rapidly.

Exposure to cold or wet weather has nothing to do with "catching a cold." There are probably more colds in winter because colder temperatures keep people indoors and in closer contact with one another. The feeling of chills that may be experienced is usually the first sign that a cold is developing. The chill does not cause the cold.

### **Symptoms**

Major symptoms include runny nose, sneezing, watering eyes, sore throat, hoarseness and coughing. You may also experience a headache, muscle aches and fever.

This rise in temperature may cause shivering and chills. Other symptoms include reddening of the eyes, enlarged, painful lymph glands in the neck, pressure or discomfort in the ears, feeling weak, "run down" and tired. The symptoms can range from very mild to quite severe and may last from one to three days or persist for several weeks.

### **Risks**

An ordinary cold most often resolves spontaneously and without any complications. However, because the respiratory tract is a series of spaces connected by passages, an infection can spread from the nose and throat to the middle ears, sinuses, trachea or lungs. These secondary infections can lead to serious disorders of the respiratory tract which appear in the form of sinusitis, pneumonia or bronchitis, and tonsillitis. In general, if a cold is not improving after the first week, or if it becomes abruptly more severe, professional attention should be sought.

### **Treatment**

There is no drug or medicine that can cure the common cold. Antibiotics are not effective for combating a cold since colds are caused by viruses, rather than bacteria. The goal of treatment, therefore, is to provide symptomatic relief and to avoid complications until the cold has run its course. Medical attention and treatment are needed only if unusual symptoms suggest some other disease. If you have a simple cold, there are several recommendations which may provide relief until the symptoms resolve:

- Rest. To date, this is the single most important factor in treatment, especially in the early stages. Increasing the hours of sleep, resting as often as possible, and avoiding unnecessary physical activity are all helpful in enabling the body's natural defenses to combat a cold.
- Fluids. To avoid dehydration from congestion and fever, at least eight glasses of fluid should be consumed daily. Hot drinks aid in thinning out mucus. Alcoholic beverages are not a satisfactory substitute for other fluids.
- Antipyretics. Aspirin or acetaminophen (Tylenol) 325 mg, two tablets every four to six hours should be taken as needed for fever; a persistent (more than one week) fever of over 101° F suggests the presence of a secondary bacterial infection and indicates the need for medical attention.
- Humidity. A recent study found that local hyperthermia (temperature elevation) of the nasal lining may be beneficial. A single treatment of inhaling hot, moist air administered for at least 20 minutes once a cold starts improves nasal symptoms. The improvement starts immediately, but surprisingly some benefits persist for several days afterward. Adding moisture to the air by cool mist or hot steam from a vaporizer, container of hot water or hot shower are equally effective.
- Irritants. Smoke, very dry air, heavy breathing due to excessive physical exertion, pollen, dust and other substances that can irritate the respiratory tract should be avoided.
- Stay warm. Dress warmly to prevent chill but avoid undue sweating. Do not swim or take cold showers.
- Avoid pressure changes. With a cold, the swollen mucus membranes may obstruct the small openings from the nasal passages to the sinuses and middle ears so that the ears cannot "pop" as freely as they should with a change in altitude. Pressure changes may cause severe pain and sometimes lead to infection, especially in the ears. Avoid airplane travel, mountain trips, swimming and diving. If it is necessary to travel by air, a decongestant should be taken one hour prior to the scheduled flight to keep air passages open.
- Medications. Over-the-counter medications may relieve the symptoms of a cold; these drugs will not, however, affect the course of your cold or the duration of the infection and none are essential to treatment. Throat lozenges, cold tablets and decongestants such as Sudafed, cough syrups like Robitussin and nasal sprays may provide temporary relief, but they should be used in moderation. Aspirin and Tylenol can relieve any aches and pains. Children and adolescents should not use aspirin. Keep in mind that cold remedies may provide some relief of symptoms, but their effectiveness varies.
  - **Remember also that all drugs have side effects and/or contraindications. Persons with high blood pressure should be cautious in the use of these drugs.** Check with the Student Care Center health care staff if you have any questions.
- Patience. Uncomplicated colds improve with time and time only. Symptomatic relief is the best that can be offered.

If you have questions after business hours call the Nurse Advice line, (773) 702-1915.