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The Common Cold

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The common cold is a viral infection of your nose and throat. A cold is usually harmless though it may not feel that way. Although more than 200 viruses can cause a common cold, the rhinovirus is the most common culprit and it is highly contagious.

Cold viruses are almost always present in the environment. It enters your body through your mouth, nose, eyes or other mucous membranes. The virus can spread through droplets in the air when someone coughs, sneezes or talks. But it also spreads by contact with someone who has a cold or by using shared objects.

Because of the sheer number of viruses that may be responsible for the cold, symptoms may vary greatly. Symptoms usually appear about two to three days after. Signs and symptoms may include:

- Mucous buildup in your nose
- Difficulty breathing through your nose
- Swelling of your sinuses
- Sneezing
- Sore throat
- Cough
- Headache

During a cold, you generally will not have a high fever and you are also unlikely to experience significant fatigue. Complications associated with your cold may include ear infection, wheezing, sinusitis and/or other infections, including but not limited to strep throat, pneumonia and bronchitis. These infections need to be treated by your health provider.

There is no cure for the common cold. Antibiotics are of no use against viruses. Over-the-counter cold medicines will not cure a common cold or make it go away any sooner and most have some potential side effects:

Pain relievers. For fever, sore throat and headache, many people turn to acetaminophen (e.g. – Tylenol) or other mild pain relievers. Keep in mind that these may harm you if taken more frequently or in larger doses than recommended. If some is good, more is not always better.

Decongestant nasal sprays. Nasal sprays may give you some relief from cold symptoms. Adults should not use decongestant drops or sprays for more than a few days because prolonged use can cause chronic inflammation of mucous membranes.

- Cough suppressants. Non-prescription cough suppressants may relieve some of your cold symptoms. However, because most of these medicines have some

side effects, such as drowsiness, dizziness, insomnia, or upset stomach, you should take them with care. Some contain ingredients that may alleviate coughing; however, coughs associated with a cold usually last less than two to three weeks. If a cough lingers longer than that, see your health provider.

You may not be able to cure your common cold, but you can make yourself as comfortable as possible. These tips may help:

Fluids. Water, juice and warm soup are all good choices. They help replace fluids lost during mucus production or fever. Avoid alcohol and caffeine which can cause dehydration.

- Chicken Soup. In addition to helping with some immune system functions, it temporarily speeds up the movement of mucus through the nose, helping relieve congestion and limiting the time viruses are in contact with the nasal lining.
- Rest. Stay home if you have a fever or a bad cough, or are drowsy from medications. This will give you a chance to rest as well as reduce the chances that you will infect others.
- Soothe your throat. Gargling with warm salt water may help soothe a sore throat.
- Saline spray. Use saline nasal drops to help relieve nasal congestion. You can usually buy these drops over-the-counter.

Most people recover from a common cold in about a week or two. If symptoms do not improve, see your health provider. You should also see your health provider if you develop a fever of 102° or higher accompanied by achiness and fatigue, fever accompanied by sweating, chills and a cough with colored phlegm, significantly swollen glands and/or severe sinus pain.

No vaccine has been developed for the common cold and results of studies using complementary methods to prevent a cold such as Zinc, Vitamin C and Echinacea are inconclusive. However, you can take some common-sense precautions to slow the spread of cold viruses:

Wash your hands. Clean your hands often with warm water and soap. Carry a bottle of alcohol-based hand rub containing at least 60 percent alcohol for times when soap and water are not available – these gels kill most germs.

- Keep kitchen and bathroom countertops clean, especially when someone in your family has a common cold.
- Sneeze or cough into the bend of your elbow, that way you cover your mouth without using your hands.
- Do not share drinking glasses or utensils with others. Use your own glass or disposable cups when you or someone else is sick.
- Avoid close, prolonged contact with anyone who has a cold.

For more information, contact the Texas AgriLife Extension Service office at 903/473-5000, ext. 157. You may also access more information from the National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases, part of the National Institutes of Health: <http://www3.niaid.nih.gov/topics/commoncold>.

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