

The Common Cold: What You Should Know

What is a cold?

A cold is a common illness that can be caused by many viruses. It can be passed easily from one person to another.

If you have a cold, your throat may be sore or scratchy. After a couple of days, you may have a runny or stuffy nose and a cough that lasts about a week. The mucus from your runny nose might be yellow or green for a few days. Some people have a fever and muscle aches in the first few days. Sometimes, you can have more serious symptoms like an ear infection, sinus infection, or pneumonia (new-MONE-ya).

Colds do not cause serious health problems for most people. But they can cause problems for people who smoke, people whose bodies can't fight infection, and people who have lung problems.

What should I do if I have a cold?

Usually, you don't have to do anything. Most colds don't cause serious problems.

There is no medicine to cure a cold, but over-the-counter medicine might help you feel better. These medicines may not be good for young children and older adults. Some may have bad side effects. Ask your doctor what medicine is best for you or your child.

How do I know if I have a cold and not something worse?

If your symptoms are normal for a cold and you've been around people with colds, you probably have a cold and not something more serious. See your doctor if you have:

- symptoms that are worse than those of a normal cold or that haven't gotten better in 10 days
- a high fever
- an earache that gets worse
- a headache or pain in your face or eyes
- a stiff neck
- shortness of breath
- sleepiness or confusion
- a health problem that makes it more likely that you will have problems with a cold (for example: asthma and other lung diseases or a disease that affects how your body fights infection)

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians.