

PATIENT INFORMATION

Viral Upper Respiratory Illness (Viral URI or a “Cold”)

What are symptoms of an upper respiratory illness?

The upper respiratory tract includes the sinuses, nasal passages, and throat. Upper respiratory infections are one of the most frequent causes of doctor’s visits with varying symptoms ranging from runny nose, sore throat, cough, breathing difficulty, and extreme tiredness.

Although upper respiratory infections can happen at any time, they are most common in the fall and winter months, from September until March.

The majority of upper respiratory infections are due to transient viral infections of the upper respiratory tract, and ***DON’T REQUIRE ANTIBIOTICS***. Most often, upper respiratory infections are contagious and can spread from person to person by inhaling respiratory droplets from coughing or sneezing. The transmission can also occur by touching the nose or mouth by hand or other object exposed to the virus.

Some people get the “cold” and the “flu” confused; this is a table to help decide which one you might have.

Frequent Common Cold & Viral Upper Respiratory Infection (URI) Symptoms

| Symptom | Cold | Flu |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Fever | Rare, usually < 101° F | Characteristic 102-104 ° F |
| Clear, runny nose | Prominent at outset | Can be present |
| Headache | Rare | Prominent at outset |
| General aches, pains | Slight | Usual; often severe |
| Fatigue, weakness | Quite mild | Can last up to 2-3 weeks |
| Extreme exhaustion | Never | Early and prominent |
| Chest discomfort, cough | Mild to moderate | Common; often severe |
| Complications | Sinusitis, ear infections | Bronchitis, pneumonia |

What should I do if I think that I have a viral upper respiratory infection (URI)?

Get plenty of rest and drink plenty of fluids. Also consider one or more of the following medications, which are available without a prescription:

Symptom(s)

Over-the-Counter Medication

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Fever and pain | Acetaminophen (Tylenol®) is generally preferred. Ibuprofen (Advil®) and/or naproxen (Naprosyn®) are other options |
| "Stuffy," clogged nose | Nasal decongestant(Afrin® , Neosynephrine® , or similar store brands) work within 20 minutes and last 12 hours. Local application minimizes systemic side effects. Do not use more than 3 days in a row. Oral decongestant (pseudoephedrine [Sudafed®] , others). (Note: these products can be associated with insomnia, nervousness, and irritability in some patients. Often decongestants are combined with other drugs (especially antihistamines) in OTC medications. "-D" at the end of a medication's name suggests that the medication includes an oral decongestant. |
| Blowing your nose easier | Guaifenesin (Robitussin®, Mucofen®, Humibid LA®, Mucinex®, Humibid-e®) . These products thin mucous and can help thin any thick or discolored drainage. |
| Suppress coughing | Dextromethorphan can be helpful as a cough suppressant, especially for nighttime use. |
| Combination medications | (Nyquil®, Tylenol Cold® & Sinus®, others) can provide significant relief. Be sure to read product labels to find the best cold preparation to match your symptoms and to determine if that medicine is safe for you. They often contain a sedating antihistamine, so avoid driving or use of machinery after administration. |

When should I seek treatment?

Viral infections can sometimes be associated with bacterial overgrowth and occasionally lead to a bacterial infection (bronchitis, ear infections, sinusitis), which typically requires antibiotic therapy. Viral URIs also may worsen asthma symptoms (wheezing) in patients with asthma; such symptoms also require further evaluation and treatment.

Seek medical advice or treatment if:

- Symptoms are getting worse after 7 days
- Symptoms are unchanged or getting worse after 10 days
- You experience shortness of breath or have any respiratory difficulty
- You experience a high fever (> 101.5°F or 38.5°C)
- You develop eye pain/ swelling and/or vision changes
- You develop severe head or facial pain/swelling

How can I prevent viral URIs?

- **Wash your hands frequently**

Cold and flu viruses are spread by touching infected persons that have come in contact with the virus and then touching one's nose or mouth. Frequent hand washing is important to prevent this process. Inhalation of infected particles in the air also can spread colds/respiratory viral infections, so watch close contacts who are coughing or sneezing.