
SELF-CARE INFORMATION ON COUGHS AND COLDS

What is a cough?

A cough is a reflex action to clear your airways of mucus and irritants such as dust or smoke. A cough will usually clear up on its own within 2-3 weeks on average.



Dry coughs

- usually felt in the throat as a tickle that sets off the coughing.
- are non-productive, which means that phlegm (thick mucus) is not produced.

Chesty coughs

- are productive, which means that phlegm is produced
- are helpful as they help clear the phlegm from your lung passages.

What causes a cough?

Most coughs, whether dry or chesty, are caused by viral infections.

What is a cold?

Colds are caused by a virus.

What are the symptoms of a cold?

- Runny nose, beginning with clear mucus that develops into thicker, green mucus as the cold progresses
- Blocked nose
- Sore throat
- Sneezing
- Cough

People with a cold may also suffer with a mild fever, earache, tiredness, and headache. Symptoms develop over one or two days and gradually get better after a few days. Some colds can last for up to 3 weeks.

How to treat coughs and colds?

Coughs and colds usually get better by themselves without any treatment.

Antibiotics are not effective in treating a cold or most coughs.

Self-care

In most cases, you will be able to treat the symptoms of a cold yourself at home by doing the following:

- Drink plenty of fluids to replace any fluids you may have lost due to sweating and having a runny nose
- Get plenty of rest
- Eat healthily: a low-fat, high-fibre diet is recommended, including plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables

Many children will lose their appetite when they have a cold. However, this is perfectly normal, and it should only last for a few days. It is recommended that children with a cold need only eat when they are hungry but should try and drink their normal quantity of fluid.

COVID-19

Many symptoms of COVID-19 are very similar to those of a cold, so we suggest if you have cough and cold you arrange for a home lateral flow test to rule this out. If you test positive for COVID-19 please follow the guidance found at <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/> or call 111 for further advice

Cough and cold medicines

These may alleviate some cold symptoms, such as a blocked nose or fever, but have no effect on the duration of illness.

Cough and cold medicines should generally not be taken for more than two weeks without first consulting with a medical practitioner. The majority of cough and cold medicines should not be given to children under the age of six. Your local pharmacist will be able to advise you on which medicine is most suitable for you or your child.

Hydration

Make sure you keep well hydrated by drinking plenty of fluids.

Nasal saline drops

Nasal saline drops or sprays can help relieve the symptoms of nasal congestion and can be particularly useful in babies and young children.

Steam inhalation

Breathing in steam may help to ease congestion by loosening mucus and making it easier to clear by blowing your nose. Steam inhalation involves sitting with your head over a bowl of hot water. Place a towel over your head, close your eyes and breathe deeply. Avoid getting the hot steam in your eyes. Adding menthol or eucalyptus to the water may help to clear the passageways in your nose.

Steam inhalation is not advised for children due to the risk of scalding. Instead, a child may benefit from sitting in a hot, steamy bathroom, or you can buy plug in humidifiers.

Painkillers

Paracetamol, ibuprofen, or aspirin can help to reduce a fever. They also act as painkillers. Always follow the manufacturer's instructions to ensure that the correct dose is given. Aspirin should not be taken by children who are under 16 years old. Some cough and cold medicines contain painkillers. It is important that you do not take more than the recommended dosage of painkillers.

Cough medicines

There is little evidence that cough medicines work beyond partially relieving symptoms for short periods. If you want a cough medicine, a simple remedy containing honey and lemon can be made at home or bought from supermarkets or pharmacies. Your pharmacist will be able to advise you on which medicine is most suitable for you or your child.

Decongestants

Decongestants are medications that reduce nasal congestion (blocked or stuffy nose). They work by reducing the swelling in the passageways of your nose.

Check with your pharmacist before using a decongestant if you take any other medication.

Decongestants should not be used for more than five to seven days because overuse can make the symptoms of congestion worse.

When to contact your GP

- If symptoms persist for more than 3 weeks
- If you have a high temperature (fever)
- If you have vomiting but not have diarrhoea, or have a rash in addition to the fever
- If you struggle to drink and become unusually lethargic
- If you cough up blood-stained phlegm (thick mucus)
- If you develop chest pain
- If you develop difficulty breathing
- If you have severe swelling of your lymph nodes (glands) in your neck and/or armpits
- If your cough is getting progressively worse
- If you have a pre-existing lung condition such as asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)

Useful contacts

- Ask your pharmacist
- NHS Choices - www.nhs.uk
- Patient UK - www.patient.co.uk

If you have further questions:

Call the **practice** on *01285 653184 or 01285 653122*

If you require **urgent** medical advice, call *111 (24 hours)*

In an **emergency** call **999**