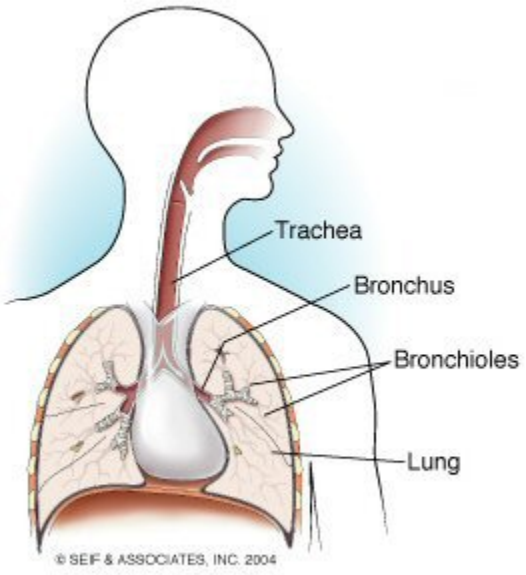
Upper Respiratory Infection (URI), Adult

You have an upper respiratory infection (URI). This is also known as the common cold. The upper respiratory tract includes the nose, sinuses, throat, trachea, and *bronchi* (airways leading to the lungs).



CAUSE

Many different viruses can infect the tissues lining the upper respiratory tract. The tissues become irritated and inflamed and often become very moist. A cold is contagious. You can easily spread the virus to others by oral contact. This includes kissing, sharing a glass, and coughing or sneezing. It can also be spread by touching your mouth or nose and then touching a surface which is then touched by another person. Symptoms typically develop one to three days after you come in contact with a cold virus.

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms vary from person to person. They may include runny nose, sneezing, nasal congestion, sinus irritation, sore throat, laryngitis, or cough. Fatigue, muscle aches, headache, and low grade fever may also occur.

DIAGNOSIS

You may diagnose your own upper respiratory infection based on familiar symptoms, since most people get a cold 2-3 times a year. Your caregiver can confirm this based on your examination. Most importantly, your caregiver can check that your symptoms are not due to another disease such as strep throat, sinusitis, pneumonia, asthma, epiglottis, or others. Blood tests, throat tests, and x-rays are not necessary to diagnose an upper respiratory infection.

PREVENTION

The best way to protect against getting a cold is to practice good hygiene. Avoid oral or hand contact with people with cold symptoms. Wash hands often if contact occurs. There is no clear evidence that vitamin C, vitamin E, Echinacea, or exercise reduces the chance of developing an upper respiratory infection.

PROGNOSIS

An upper respiratory infection is benign. Most people improve within a week, but symptoms can last two weeks. A residual cough may last a week longer. Complications can develop.

RISKS AND COMPLICATIONS

You may be at risk for a more severe case of the common cold if you smoke cigarettes, have chronic heart or lung disease, or if you have a weakened immune system. Bacterial sinusitis, middle ear infections, and bacterial pneumonia can complicate the common cold. The common cold can worsen asthma and COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease). Sometimes these complications can be life threatening.

TREATMENT

Treatment is directed at relieving symptoms. There is no cure. Antibiotics are not effective. In fact, improper use of antibiotics can lead to the development of drug resistant bacteria.

Non-medical treatment is safe and may be helpful:

- Increased fluid intake

- Inhale heated mist or steam (vaporizer or shower)
- Sip chicken soup
- Get plenty of rest
- Use gargles or lozenges for comfort

Zinc gel and zinc lozenges, taken in the first 24 hours of the common cold, can shorten the duration and lessen the severity of symptoms. Pain medications may help fever, muscle aches, and throat pain. A variety of non-prescription medications are available to treat congestion and runny nose. Your caregiver can make recommendations and may suggest nasal or lung inhalers for other symptoms. Once again, antibiotics are not effective for upper respiratory infections.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Only take over-the-counter or prescription medicines for pain, discomfort, or fever as directed by your caregiver. **Do not use aspirin if under 18 years of age.** This is because of aspirin's association with Reye's syndrome.
- Use a warm mist humidifier or inhale steam from a shower to increase air moisture. This may keep secretions moist and make it easier to breathe.
- Drink plenty of clear liquids. You are drinking enough fluids if the urine remains a light yellow color rather than a dark color.
- Rest as needed.
- Return to work when your temperature has returned to normal or as your caregiver advises. You may need to stay home longer to avoid infecting others. You can also use a face mask and careful hand washing to prevent spread of virus.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- After the first few days, you feel you are getting worse rather than better.
- You need your caregiver’s advice about medications to control symptoms.
- You develop symptoms that you think suggest complications such as pneumonia, sinusitis, or strep throat.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You develop an oral temperature above 101° F (38.3° C) or if the fever lasts more than 2 days.
- You develop severe or persistent headache, ear pain, sinus pain, or chest pain.
- You develop a prolonged cough, cough up blood, have a change in your usual mucous (if you have chronic lung disease), or develop wheezing.
- You develop sore muscles, stiff neck, or severe headache not controlled with medications.

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