

COMMON COLD

Introduction

A cold is a mild viral infection of the nose, throat, sinuses and upper airways. It can cause a blocked nose followed by a runny nose, sneezing, a sore throat and a cough.



In adults and older children, the cold will usually last for about a week as the body fights off the infection.

[Colds in younger children](#) can last up to two weeks.

There is no cure for a cold, although you can usually relieve the [symptoms of a cold](#) at home by taking over-the-counter medication, such as paracetamol, and drinking plenty of fluids.

TREATING A COMMON COLD

You should be able to treat cold symptoms yourself by trying over-the-counter cold medications and following some simple advice.

Over-the-counter cold medications

In the UK, over-the-counter cold medicines are probably the most widely used type of medication.

These include:

- Painkillers such as [ibuprofen](#), [paracetamol](#) and aspirin – which are the only type of medication known to be effective in treating colds. **Children under 16 years old or breastfeeding women should not take aspirin.**
- [Decongestants](#) (medications designed to reduce a blocked nose) – may have limited effectiveness against colds. However, don't use them for more than seven days because overuse can make the symptoms of congestion worse. **Children under six years old should not use decongestants.**

Most over-the-counter cold medications aren't suitable for children under six years old. If your child is unwell, talk to your pharmacist about the best option.

When to see a GP

You only really need to see your GP if:

- your symptoms persist for more than **three** (3) weeks
- you have a high temperature (fever) of 39°C (102.2°F) or above
- you cough up blood-stained phlegm (thick mucus)
- you feel [chest pain](#)
- you have breathing difficulties
- you experience severe swelling of your lymph nodes (glands) in your neck and/or armpits

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TOP TIPS FOR PARENTS

The following tips may help your child cope with the symptoms of a cold.

- encourage your child to rest and make sure they drink plenty of fluids – water is fine but warm drinks can be soothing
- if they have a blocked nose you can make their breathing easier by raising the pillow end of your child's bed or cot by putting books or bricks under the legs or placing a pillow under the mattress (although you should not put anything under the mattress of a baby younger than one year old)
- paracetamol liquid or ibuprofen liquid can help ease a fever and pain – check the dosage instructions on the packaging and never give aspirin to children under 16 years old
- a warm, moist atmosphere can ease breathing if your child has a blocked nose – take your child into the bathroom and run a hot bath or shower or use a vaporiser to humidify the air
- keep the room aired and at a comfortable temperature, and don't let your child get too hot – if a small child or baby has a temperature let them wear just a nappy or underwear

Is my child's cold serious?

Colds aren't usually serious. However, babies, the elderly and anyone whose immune system is compromised can be at risk of developing more serious complications, such as a bacterial chest infection.

When should I take my child to the doctor?

Most colds get better **on their own without treatment**, seek medical advice if:

- a baby aged less than three months develops a fever higher than 38°C
- cold symptoms last for more than 10 days, particularly if your child is coughing up green, yellow or brown sputum or has a fever – this could be a sign of a bacterial infection that needs treatment with antibiotics
- your child is finding it difficult to breathe – seek medical help immediately from your surgery or local hospital
- your child complains of pain in the nasal passages after two to four days of home treatment
- your baby or child has, or seems to have, severe [earache](#) (babies with earache often rub their ears and seem irritable) as they could have an ear infection that may need antibiotic treatment
- your child complains of throat pain for longer than three or four days, or their throat pain seems unusually severe, as they may have bacterial tonsillitis that needs antibiotic treatment
- your child develops other symptoms such as pain or swelling in the face or in the chest, a headache or a very bad sore throat
- your child seems to be getting worse rather than better