Colds, Flu, and Bronchitis: Treatment and Care

Colds, flu, most sore throats, and bronchitis are caused by viruses. There are no antibiotics that cure these viruses. Using antibiotics when you don’t need them — or not using them correctly — can make your body resistant to the antibiotics, meaning the antibiotics won’t work when you need them. The good news is that your body’s immune system will fight the virus, and there are things you can do to feel better.

How can I treat a cold, flu, or bronchitis?

- Stay home and rest, especially if you have a fever.
- Stop smoking and avoid secondhand smoke.
- Drink plenty of fluids like water, fruit juices, and clear soups.
- Relieve a sore throat by gargling a few times a day with warm salt water (¼ to ½ teaspoon salt per 8-ounce glass of warm water. Don’t drink or swallow the salt water). Throat sprays or lozenges also may help relieve the pain.
- Use salt water (saline) nose spray to help loosen mucus and moisten the tender skin in your nose.
- A clean cool-mist humidifier or steam from a hot shower or bath helps keep the nose and throat moist.

What medicines are available to treat a cold, flu, or bronchitis?

There are medicines that don’t require a prescription that can help treat your symptoms, but they do not shorten the length of time you are sick. Some medicines are made to treat more than one symptom, so read the package, and follow the instructions carefully. If you have questions about whether it’s safe for you to take these medicines, call your doctor.

Fever and Aches

These medicines can help you reduce your fever and relieve body aches:

- Acetaminophen, such as Tylenol® and other brands
- Ibuprofen, such as Advil®, Motrin®, and other brands
- Aspirin, such as Bayer® and other brands, should be taken by adults only. Never give aspirin to someone younger than 19 years old unless recommended by a doctor.

Cough

Cough medicines can help you stop coughing so much, which can be helpful, especially at night. There are many different kinds of cough medicines, so if you are not sure what is best for you, ask the pharmacist.

- Cough and cold medicines should NOT be given to children younger than 6 years old.
- Cough medicines may cause serious side effects in people with high blood pressure, diabetes, or heart disease.
- People with diabetes should use sugar-free cough syrups.

Nasal Congestion (Stuffy Nose)

Decongestant medicines help clear your nose so you can breathe better. They shrink the swelling and mucus in your nose and sinuses. Decongestants are sold as tablets or nasal sprays.

- Children younger than 6 years old should not be given decongestants. Decongestants do not work for young children and can be harmful.
- Decongestant tablets taken by mouth such as Sudafed® or other brands should only be taken as directed on the label. These medicines can cause jitters and keep you awake. Decongestants may also raise blood pressure and cause your heart to race. If you have high blood pressure or heart problems, check with your doctor before taking them.
- Nasal sprays, such as Afrin® and other brands, should not be used for more than 3 days, because they can actually cause sinus swelling. Nasal sprays contain different types of ingredients. If you are not sure about what to use, ask the pharmacist.

Runny Nose

Antihistamines can dry up the mucus in your nose.

- Benadryl® or other brands dry the nose and throat but can make you tired, so you should not use them if you will be driving.
- Claritin® and related products cause less drowsiness but may be less effective for cold-related congestion.
How can I prevent getting or spreading a virus?

- Get flu vaccine every year.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, or use an alcohol-based hand gel.
- Cough or sneeze into a tissue or into the inside of your elbow if you don’t have a tissue. Throw tissues away and wash your hands. Always wash your hands before touching your eyes, nose, or mouth.
- Avoid close physical contact with people who are sick.
- Do not share eating utensils, drinking glasses, towels, or other personal items.
- Use household cleaners to clean things that are touched often, like door knobs, toys, and phones.

When should I call my doctor?

Call your doctor if you have any of the following symptoms:

- Cough that lasts more than 2 weeks
- Coughing blood
- Fever of 102°F or higher, or fever that lasts more than 3 days
- For infants under 2 months old, any temperature of 100.6 or higher, taken rectally
- Shortness of breath during routine activities
- Sinus pain or severe headache
- Any breathing problems or chest pain while taking a breath
- Sinus pain that lasts for more than 7 days or sinus symptoms that improve for a few days and then get worse
- Severe earache or drainage from your ear

When Your Doctor Does Prescribe Antibiotics

Viral infections sometimes lead to bacterial infections. If your doctor does prescribe an antibiotic for you, make sure you do the following:

- Take all of the medicine as prescribed, even if you feel better after a few days.
- Do not skip doses.
- Do not give any of your medicine to anyone else.
- Do not save any antibiotics for the next time you feel sick.

Where can I get more information?

- Massachusetts Medical Society (www.massmed.org/YourHealthFirst)
- Massachusetts Department of Public Health (www.mass.gov/flu)
- U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Get Smart about Antibiotics (www.cdc.gov/GetSmart)
- Tacoma Pierce Health Department: What Can I Do to Fight a Cold, Cough or Sore Throat — Know Common Symptoms and Remedies (www.tpchd.org/files/library/eccdcce626d6b52f.pdf)