

## Learn about **common cold**

By: **Francisco Javier Díaz Castrillón, MD**  
Specialist in Medical Microbiology and Parasitology  
PhD in Virology, University of Antioquia

Viral infections of the respiratory tract are commonly referred to as “flu”. However, when using these terms, it is important to distinguish between two different illnesses: influenza (see Health Letter 89), which is caused by the virus of the same name and is characterized by high fever, intense general discomfort, headache, cough, and other respiratory symptoms; and other viral respiratory infections that are also included in the term “flu,” which are localized in the upper respiratory tract and are more appropriately called “common cold”. This Health Letter specifically addresses the common cold.

### 1. What is the common cold and how does it manifest?

The common cold is a contagious respiratory illness that affects the upper respiratory tract, that is: the nose, throat, and sometimes the vocal cords.

It presents with nasal discharge (runny nose), sneezing, cough, nasal congestion, sore throat, some fever, and general malaise. After 2 or 3 days, the clear mucus coming from the nose may change color and become yellow or green. The cold can last up to 10 days but more frequently resolves in 3 to 5 days.



### 2. What causes the common cold?

The common cold is caused by a wide variety of viruses collectively known as “respiratory viruses.”

### 3. Who can get a cold and how is it transmitted?

Anyone can catch a cold. A healthy adult has between one and three colds each year. It is even more common in children. It is spread by direct contact with an infected person through kissing, hugging, shaking hands, breathing close to them, or by sharing objects like cups, utensils, etc., that have been in contact with the infected person.

### 4. When should you see a doctor?

A person with a cold should consult a physician:

- If they suffer from a bronchial disease such as asthma, chronic bronchitis, pulmonary emphysema, etc.
- If they have heart failure or coronary disease.

- If they have difficulty breathing or rapid breathing.
- If they have a high fever, over 38.5 °C (101.3 °F).
- If the cold lasts more than 10 days.
- If they have any symptoms other than those described (see question 1).
- If symptoms like fever or cough worsen or reappear after seeming to improve.

## 5. How is the common cold diagnosed?

Diagnosis is based on clinical symptoms (see question 1). Laboratory tests are usually not necessary.



## 6. How is the common cold treated?

There is no specific medication to treat the cold. Antibiotics are not useful. Treatment is based on self-care and addressing the symptoms:

- If you have a fever, you can take antipyretics such as acetaminophen.
- If you have significant nasal congestion (“runny nose” or stuffy nose), you can take an antihistamine or another decongestant.
- If you have a dry cough that prevents sleep, you can take an antitussive. This medication is not recommended if the cough is wet (with sputum or phlegm).

For throat irritation, you can suck on lozenges or honey. If you have several of the symptoms mentioned above, you may take a “cold medicine” that combines several of them. There are many cold medicines on the market. Consult a pharmacist.

**AHCHOO!**

- Rest and keep warm; cold and wind can worsen colds.
- Drink plenty of water or other room temperature fluids (they help relieve sore throat and dry cough). Do not consume alcoholic beverages.
- Do not smoke. This is a great time to quit smoking.
- Inhale water vapor; it helps to loosen mucus.
- Wash your hands frequently and use disposable tissues to avoid spreading the virus to others.
- Keep the house and rooms well-ventilated.

## 7. How is the common cold prevented?

There is no vaccine for this illness. If living with someone who has a cold, it is recommended not to touch the sick person or items they use, maintain distance, advise the person to wear a mask, ventilate the home, and disinfect objects the patient uses with alcohol.

### Recommended Reading

- J. de la Flor i Brú. Upper respiratory tract infections-1: common cold. *Pediatr Integral* 2017; XXI (6): 377 – 398.
- Health Practice Guide. Unit 2. Diseases of the face-nose-mouth-throat-ears.
- Health Letter 89: Learn About Influenza

### Web Pages Consulted

- <https://espanol.cdc.gov/respiratory-viruses/guidance/index.html>
- <https://www.cdc.gov/common-cold/es/about/acerca-del-resfriado-comun>



Imágenes tomadas de Freepik

### Editorial Committee

**Salud VID** • Danny Javier Robles Gómez - General Director • Juan Mario Jaramillo Acosta - Director of Clinical Laboratory  
 • Carlos Mario Cardona Betancur - Head of Dental Laboratory • Ana María Montoya Duque - Microbiologist  
 • Margarita María Montañón Hernández - Dental Coordinator • Daniel Mauricio Castañeda Vargas - Marketing Coordinator  
**Organización VID** • Santiago Estrada Mesa - Assistance, Teaching, and Research  
**Clínica Cardio VID** • Juan Carlos González Arroyave - Scientific Director

Reviewed and Designed by the Communications Department of Organización VID

