Common Cold

The common cold is a type of upper respiratory infections (URIs). URIs are one of the most common reasons why students come to the student health service, especially in the winter months. Symptoms range from a runny nose and scratchy throat to high fever and trouble breathing.

Several different viruses can infect the upper respiratory tract, nose, throat, and larynx and cause the common cold. Colds usually resolve themselves in 1 to 2 weeks whether treated or not. **Important:** **Antibiotics are not effective in treating the common cold.**

Sharing drinks, shaking hands, kissing, hand-to-hand contact, and inhaling saliva from an infected person may infect a person. Also, poor nutrition, lack of rest, alcohol use, and smoking may inhibit your body’s defense to the common cold. The most important step you can take to avoid a cold is to stay healthy by having a good diet, washing your hands frequently, exercising, and getting plenty of rest.

If you have a history of asthma, diabetes, rheumatic fever, tuberculosis, taking an immuno-suppressant drug, or have had splenectomy, make an appointment to see a health care provider.

**Common Colds**

Colds are usually caused by a rhinovirus resulting in fever, runny nose, moist cough, muscle aches, fatigue, headache, sore throat and fullness in the ears lasting 7 to 10 days.

**Antibiotics and the Common Cold**

No medicine yet exists that will kill or stop the growth of the viruses that cause the common cold. Allow your body to get rid of the virus in its own way. Reasons for not taking antibiotics for a common cold include:

- They just don’t help. Antibiotics only work on bacterial infections; the common cold is a viral infection.
- Beneficial bacteria are killed leading to yeast infections and diarrhea.
- Bacteria become resistant to antibiotics. When you are sick with a bacterial infection, antibiotics may then no longer be effective.
- Antibiotics may cause rashes.
- Antibiotics are expensive.

When antibiotics are not prescribed, remember these important reasons!

**Brand Name or Generic?**

A generic medication contains the same active ingredient and costs less than a name brand. With a brand medicine you are paying for all the research that went into manufacturing the drug. The only difference may be the filler in the generic product.

**Treatment Recommendations**

There are a number of things you can do to help your recovery:

- **Drink plenty of fluids.** It is not necessary to eat if you have no appetite, but you should drink fluids to help control fever and reduce aches and pains. Drink at least five, 8-ounce glasses of fluid a day, preferably water.

- **Rest.** You do not have to stay in bed, but you should limit your activity as much as possible. The energy used for physical activity could be used by your body to fight the infection.

- **Humidify the air by** using a cool mist vaporizer, taking a steamy shower, hanging wet towels in the room, steam inhalations (face bowl), or placing a warm, moist towel over your face.

- **Use salt-water nose drops** (one-half teaspoon of salt in an 8 ounce glass of water or pre-mixed spray from pharmacy) to dislodge crusty nasal secretions that block openings into the sinuses and ears.

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• Take acetaminophen (such as Tylenol), ibuprofen (such as Advil or Motrin), or naproxen (such as Aleve) which are available over-the-counter. They can relieve muscle aches and fever. Follow the recommended dosage on the package. Caution: Aspirin may cause Reyes Syndrome; it is not recommended for college students.

• Do not smoke, and avoid second hand smoke.

• Oral decongestants (such as Sudafed) are used for a stuffy nose. They open clogged airways by reducing the swelling in the nasal passages and mucosal areas. Decongestants are available in nasal spray and tablet. Preparations without antihistamines are less likely to cause drowsiness. Decongestants make some people jittery, unable to sleep and may cause dry mouth. Caution: People with high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease or overactive thyroids should consult with their clinician before taking these medicines. Overuse of nasal spray may cause nasal rebound and worsening nasal congestion.

• Antihistamines are used for runny nose and sneezing. They block the release of a chemical called histamine. By blocking the body’s natural sequence of events, the antihistamine reduces the amount of nasal secretions and pressure in the nasal cavity. They may also reduce cough caused by post nasal drip. Caution: These medicines may cause drowsiness. Avoid using antihistamines with products containing alcohol, sedatives, hypnotics, antidepressants, antipsychotics, certain analgesics, or anti-anxiety agents.

• Cough syrups containing dextromethorphan may be used to suppress cough, especially if sleep is disrupted.

• Keeping a throat lozenge, cough drop, or hard candy in your mouth will stimulate your saliva and help soothe your throat.

• Gargle with warm, salt water (one-half teaspoon in an 8 ounce glass of water) every 3 to 4 hours to soothe throat pain.

• Give yourself time. Infections can take 7 to 10 days before the symptoms start to disappear.

• Practice good hygiene. To help prevent the spread of the virus, wash your hands frequently, cover your nose and mouth when sneezing, properly dispose of facial tissues, and do not share items like toothbrushes and drinking containers.

• If antibiotics are prescribed for your particular infection, carefully follow the instructions on the label. Antibiotics can reduce the effectiveness of birth control pills; a back-up method of birth control (e.g. condoms with spermicide) is suggested during the entire pill cycle.

Things to Remember
When purchasing over-the-counter (OTC) products:
• Always inspect the package for signs of tampering.
• Check the product expiration date to make sure the product is still effective.
• Look for products that target only the symptoms affecting you to avoid taking unnecessary medications.

Before taking OTC drugs:
• Always read labels carefully!
• Check the list of active ingredients for substances that you may be allergic to.
• Take note of any side effects and drug interactions.
• Use the medication only as directed.
• If your condition does not improve within 5 to 7 days, consult with your clinician.

If you have any questions regarding your OTC medicine, ask a pharmacist. If you are unable to talk with a pharmacist, call or see a health care provider.

**Call the student health service if any of the following happens:**

• Temperature over 102°F persists
• Severe headache
• Increased facial swelling
• Very large neck glands
• Painful joints
• Skin rash
• Chest pain
• Shortness of breath
• Difficulty swallowing own saliva
• Persistent vomiting
• Blurred vision
• Persistent greenish nasal discharge
• Foul odor to breath

If your need is urgent, and the student health service is closed, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call 911 for an ambulance.