

PUBLIC HEALTH NEWS

WEST WINDSOR HEALTH DEPARTMENT

WINTER 2009

OH NO ... YOU CAUGHT A COLD!



The common cold is caused by over 200 different viruses. A cold develops gradually, and is most commonly spread hand-to-face after contact with someone who has a cold, or by touching a hard surface or object that a person with a cold has recently touched. Though coughing and sneezing can spread airborne particles, transmission is unlikely until there has been prolonged contact with someone who has a cold.

TREATING THE SYMPTOMS

- ❑ Blow your nose instead of sniffing mucus back into your head. Since pressure from blowing hard can cause an earache, blow gently while pressing a finger over one nostril to clear the other. Wash your hands after blowing your nose.



- ❑ Stay home if you're sick and get plenty of rest. With our busy lives, most of us hesitate to spend a day or two quietly at home. Think of it as an investment - resting, especially when you first come down with a cold, allows your body to direct more of its energy and resources to the immune system's battle.
- ❑ Stay hydrated. Drinking lots of non-caffeinated beverages (water, diluted juices, herb tea or chicken soup) will also help to thin secretions, soothe inflamed membranes that line your nose and throat, keeping them moist and resistant to secondary infections.
- ❑ Let a low grade fever do its work. The rise in temperature slows the growth of viruses or bacteria and activates your immune system to do its job. Unless you have a high fever, tolerating a moderate fever for a few days may actually help you get better faster. Check with your doctor if the sick person is very young or elderly, or has a pre-existing condition like heart or lung disease.
- ❑ Apply hot or cold packs around congested sinuses - either temperature may help you feel more comfortable. Buy reusable hot or cold packs, or make your own. Make a hot pack by heating a damp washcloth in the microwave for 55 seconds (test the temperature first before using). A small bag of frozen peas makes a flexible cold pack.
- ❑ Sleep with an extra pillow under your head to allow gravity to help mucus drain from your nasal passages. If the angle is too uncomfortable, place the pillows between the mattress and box spring for a more gradual slope.
- ❑ Use a cool mist humidifier, lean over a bowl of hot water with a towel over your head, or breathe in steamy air created by a bathroom shower to ease congestion.

OVER-THE-COUNTER MEDICATIONS



THERE IS NO CURE FOR THE COMMON COLD.

While most viruses live for about 10 days regardless of what you do, there are therapies and medications

that can relieve or shorten the duration of your symptoms.

You can buy over-the-counter (OTC) medications without a doctor's prescription. Only take what you really need by choosing a medication that most closely matches your symptoms. Avoid "combos" like *Theraflu* or *Tylenol Cold***, which often include ingredients you don't really need. Read the label carefully as many companies using one brand name sell a variety of products with different active ingredients.

REMINDER: Because serious and potentially life-threatening side effects can occur, the FDA has issued a Public Health Advisory for parents NOT to use cough and cold products in children under 2 years of age unless specifically instructed to do so by a health care provider.

- ❑ **ANTIHISTAMINES** relieve runny nose, sneezing, itching of the nose and throat, and watery eyes due to **allergies**. However, they have the opposite effect on cold symptoms, further drying nasal membranes and slowing the flow of mucus. [diphenhydramine, cetirizine, loratadine (*Benadryl*, *Zyrtec*, *Claritin*)]
- ❑ **DECONGESTANTS** narrow blood vessels in the nasal passages and reduce congestion. [pseudoephedrine, phenylephrine (*Sudafed*)]
- ❑ **MEDICATED NASAL SPRAYS OR DROPS** deliver a **decongestant** directly to congested membranes. They should not be used for more than two or three days to avoid the rebound congestion that occurs when you stop using the medication. (*Sudafed*, *Afrin*)
- ❑ **SALINE NASAL SPRAYS** (salt water) or using a neti pot can open breathing passages and may be used as often as you need relief.

- ❑ **THROAT LOZENGES OR SPRAYS** have a local anesthetic that numbs the throat (*Sucrets*, *Spect-T*, *Chloraseptic*). Regular cough drops can also help lubricate and soothe a sore throat. Gargle with salt water (1 teaspoon of salt in 8 ounces of warm water) to help reduce swelling and relieve discomfort.
- ❑ **EXPECTORANTS** work by thinning mucus so that it be can more easily coughed up when you have a wet, "juicy" cough. [guaifenesin (*Mucinex*, *Robitussin*)]
- ❑ **ANTITUSSIVES** are cough suppressants that work by quieting a cough. They are usually recommended for a dry, irritating (nonproductive) cough where you are not producing mucus. [dextromethorphan (*Robitussin*, *Triaminic*, *Vicks 44*)]
- ❑ **ANALGESICS** relieve muscle aches and pains, and reduce fever. Never give aspirin or aspirin-containing medications to children younger than 19. [aspirin, acetaminophen (*Tylenol*), ibuprofen (*Motrin/Advil*), ketoprofen (*Actron*), sodium naproxen (*Aleve*)]
- ❑ **SUPPLEMENTS** like zinc, echinacea, and vitamin C have mixed research results - some studies show that they shorten a cold's severity and duration, some do not. Check with your health care provider before mixing any supplements with prescription or OTC medications or if you have another pre-existing condition.

** All chemical and brand names are examples of common OTC medications, and are not endorsements by the Health Department. Talk with your health care provider or pharmacist for advice.



A FEW GENERAL GUIDELINES ...

- ❑ Bottles of liquid medications should be shaken well before each use.
- ❑ Use a measuring teaspoon when determining a dose – do not use a silverware teaspoon since sizes vary.
- ❑ Drink a full glass of water when taking capsules or tablets. Always take medication standing or sitting up - never lying down.
- ❑ Read the label carefully. Pay special attention to the active ingredients if you are taking more than one OTC or prescription drug to avoid taking too much of a particular ingredient. Many preparations contain the same active ingredients. Check the label for the “extras”: some OTC medications contain hidden sodium (effervescent or “fizzy” products), sugar (sweet or fruit flavored syrups), or caffeine (cough & cold products).
- ❑ If a label says “take on an empty stomach” it means no food one hour before or two hours after taking a medication.
- ❑ Take the medication exactly as instructed on the label – more is not necessarily better! Only give children and babies medications that are made for their age and weight - never give a smaller dose of adult strength medicine to children.
- ❑ Do a periodic medicine cabinet “check” for expired medications. Dispose of out-of-date medicines properly by placing them inside an opaque container and disposing with the garbage — do not flush down the drain or toilet, or place with the recycling.
- ❑ Talk with the pharmacist before taking an OTC medication if you are already taking any prescription medicine(s) to avoid a potential interaction. Remember to mention any natural supplements, remedies or herbs that you take.



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Prevent. Promote. Protect.

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ANTIBIOTICS

ANTIBIOTICS only kill bacteria – they cannot kill a virus. If your health care provider says you do not have a bacterial infection, don't demand a prescription for antibiotics.

- ❑ ALWAYS take the full course of antibiotics, even if you are feeling better before the medicine is finished.
- ❑ Never save some of a prescription medication to treat yourself or others later.
- ❑ Tell your health care provider if you are taking any other medication (prescription or OTC), drink alcohol, have allergies or are pregnant.
- ❑ Antibiotics can also kill the “good” bacteria in your body, causing stomach upset, diarrhea or vaginal infections - eating yogurt with live cultures or taking acidophilus pills may help.

PREVENTION IS THE KEY

- ❑ Wash your hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. You can also use an alcohol based hand sanitizer. Since alcohol is an antiseptic (not an antibiotic), it physically destroys germs so viruses (and bacteria) can't develop resistance.
- ❑ Keep your hands away from your face. Most people "catch" a cold by giving it to themselves when they touch a contaminated surface and then touch their eyes, nose or mouth with their contaminated hands.
- ❑ Disinfect surfaces that are touched by others such as telephones, computer keyboards, handrails, doorknobs, and counter or tabletops. Someone with a cold (or the flu) is contagious up to 24 hours before they have any symptoms.
- ❑ Keep your immune system strong with a healthy diet that includes lots of fruits and vegetables, moderate exercise on most days of the week, and adequate rest.



A sneeze travels 100 m.p.h. as it leaves your mouth! All that speed and power means a sneeze can cover a large area in very little time ... if you don't cover your cold!

- ❑ Protect others from your germs. Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze - if you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your sleeve, not your hands.

CALL THE DOCTOR

Colds (and flu) rarely have complications that require a doctor's care. However, call your health care provider if:

- your symptoms don't improve in 7 to 10 days, or you feel sicker with each passing day
- you develop breathing problems or a respiratory infection
- you cough hard for more than 10 days or cough up thick rusty or green mucus
- you have a high fever for 3 days or that does not respond to medication
- you have a severe earache or any ear drainage
- a sore throat becomes severe and a fever accompanies it, or you have trouble swallowing
- a child develops rapid or difficult breathing, starts wheezing, or acts unusually irritable or lethargic

A NOTE ABOUT THE FLU



Influenza ("the flu") is a highly contagious respiratory disease caused by viruses. It most often hits abruptly with a high fever, headache and severe body aches and pain. The flu can be spread by sneezes, coughs and hand contact. Healthy adults and children usually recover from the flu in 7 to 10 days, although a lingering fatigue can last for an additional week or two.

People who get the flu and who are elderly, aren't healthy, or have a weakened immune system can develop potentially fatal complications – the most serious being pneumonia. Unlike the common cold, there is a vaccine to protect you from seasonal flu. ***Flu viruses are constantly mutating so you need a flu shot every year.***