

SUNSHINE MEDICAL CLINIC
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The Common Cold

As we all know, the common cold is an illness that affects everyone at some time or another. Adults tend to get 2-4 colds per year, while children may contract 6-8 every year. Two billion dollars are spent per year on the more than 800 cold remedies on the market, and 50 million days are lost from work or school each year due to this common problem.

The common cold will never be prevented completely because hundreds of viruses cause it. These viruses are spread by droplets released when someone coughs, or from touching something that has germs on it, such as a doorknob or a table. No matter what your mother or grandmother may have said, cold or wet weather does not cause a cold, though they are especially common from November through May. The reason for this is probably that children are closer together in schools, as well as the main viruses that cause colds being more active in this time of the year.

The typical cold involves a “runny nose” with clear drainage that turns yellow or green for a couple of days, and then goes back to clear. This goes along with congestion, sneezing, sore throat, cough, low fever, headache, and perhaps chills.

The treatment for a typical cold can make you feel better and reduce the spread of the germs. Bed rest, or at least less activity, petroleum jelly to the nose where it is sore from blowing, gargles of salt water to help the sore throat, drinking hot liquids or inhaling steam to clear the nose, and drinking plenty of fluids to loosen the phlegm, are tried and true remedies which also have scientific proof of good results. Children should have their noses cleaned out frequently, using a suction bulb, to keep the nose open. Antihistamines are not usually helpful, except for the side effect of drowsiness, which can be helpful at night. Decongestants help with the nasal congestion, but have their own problems. Decongestant nose drops or sprays give immediate relief, but will make the congestion much worse if used for any more than 3-4 days. Oral decongestants are good to use if the congestion is lasting longer than this, but these can raise the blood pressure. When blood pressure is a concern, using the home remedies, like saline nose drops, drinking hot liquids, and inhaling steam, are a sure bet. Cough syrups are helpful for suppressing the nagging cough, with dextromethorphan being the best medicine for daytime cough relief. To loosen a cough, drinking 6-8 cups of fluids per day is the best treatment.

The one thing that we often do when we or a loved one gets a cold is to go to the doctor. Unfortunately, there is nothing that the doctor can do for a common cold, except advise you to wait it out. Antibiotics aren't prescribed unless there are clear

signs of a bacterial infection, because unnecessary antibiotics can cause allergic reactions, or can cause emergence of resistant strains of bacteria. The doctor has no medicines to make the cold go away, and will only prescribe medicines if there are problems like ear infections or sinusitis. The time to check with the doctor is when the fever is high (over 101), if there is pain or tenderness in ears or sinuses, if the nasal drainage does not clear up in 2 weeks, or if there is difficulty breathing or chest pain. These are signs that complications might have occurred, and for these problems, there are medicines.

The best bet in dealing with colds is to avoid them as much as possible. The ways to do this is to wash your hands frequently, especially if you have regular contact with someone with a cold, and to avoid being in close contact with a coughing person. Ask this person to cover his or her mouth, and to wash his or her hands frequently as well. Besides that, the best we can do is to go to bed with chicken soup, drink plenty of fluids, and wait it out.