

Coughs & Colds

Coughs, colds, flu, fever, sore throat and antibiotics





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The common ailments mentioned in this booklet will often not need a prescription and are rarely serious, so self-treating your ailment, or with advice and medicines from your pharmacist can often be the easiest and quickest way to deal with your problem.

This booklet will help you decide what to do about common ailments such as colds and flu, and give you important information about antibiotics.



More information

For more advice and information on treating common health problems visit the Consumer Health Information Centre www.chic.org.uk

To speak to a nurse for advice on over-the-counter medicines call the **Over-the-Counter Medicines Advice Line** on **020 8742 7042** (weekdays 10am-3pm). They can also give you details of patient support groups and tell you if you need to speak to a pharmacist or GP.

Coughs, colds and flu

Symptoms of colds and flu include fever, aches, sore throat, runny nose, blocked nose and cough. Cold and flu symptoms are similar. However, flu symptoms are more severe and last longer.

Should I have a flu vaccination?

Everyone aged 65+ should have a flu jab each year. You should also consider having a flu jab if:

- you have a long-term (chronic) condition like a heart problem, asthma, kidney disease, diabetes or a weak immune system because of disease or treatment for instance steroid medication or cancer treatment (does not apply to babies under 6 months old).
- you live in a nursing home, residential home or other long-stay home.

If you think you need a flu jab contact your GP surgery.

How can I treat cough, cold and flu symptoms?

- Ask your pharmacist. The fastest and most effective way to treat colds and flu is with advice from your pharmacist.
- Breathing in steam from a hot shower, in the bath or from a basin can help ease a blocked nose, stuffiness and a sore throat. You can also put inhalant drops, aromatic rub or salts in the water for extra relief.
- Drink plenty of fluids. Drinks like hot water with lemon juice and honey have a soothing effect. Vitamin C (found in citrus fruits like oranges and kiwi fruit) can help you fight colds and flu.
- Get plenty of rest and avoid strenuous exercise.
- If you don't feel like eating try soup instead.
- There are several remedies to treat cough, cold and flu symptoms, ask your pharmacist for advice.



Where to get advice

- Ask your pharmacist or call **NHS Direct** on 0845 4647.
- Ask your pharmacist which medicine is best for you. For example, if you have high blood pressure many decongestants may not be suitable as they can make some symptoms worse.
- If your cough persists for more than a fortnight, you have a lot of yellow or green phlegm, you have pain in your chest or shortness of breath ask your pharmacist or a GP for advice or call **NHS Direct** on 0845 4647.

Use this table to help you find the right remedy for cough, cold and flu symptoms.

Symptom	Remedy
High temperature, headache, aches and pains	The three most common remedies for pain, fever and headaches are paracetamol, aspirin* or ibuprofen** . Aspirin* and ibuprofen** also have anti-inflammatory properties (good for sprains, aches and pains).
Cough	There are many cough medicines available. Ensure you get the right variant for your type of cough (like dry or chesty).
Sore Throat	Sore throat relief comes in the form of lozenges, pastilles and sprays as well as traditional pain relief remedies such as paracetamol and aspirin* .
Runny Nose	The most common remedies for runny nose can be taken orally as a tablet or as a liquid.
Blocked Nose	There are several decongestants available which are generally taken orally as a tablet or by spraying or inhaling the remedy into the nose.
Colds and flu are caused by viruses. Antibiotics do not work on viruses so will not cure colds and flu.	

* Children under 16 years old and people with asthma should not take aspirin.

** If you are asthmatic speak to a GP before taking ibuprofen.

Fever or raised temperature

A high temperature is a symptom of many common illnesses such as colds or flu.

How do I know if I have a fever?

If you are flushed or feel hot and sweaty you may have a fever or high temperature. An adult has a fever if their body temperature is 38C/100.4F or more.

If I have a fever what should I do?

If you have a fever there are ways you can bring it down to reduce discomfort.

- The most common remedies for reducing a high temperature are ibuprofen**, aspirin* and paracetamol.
- Cool drinks or putting a damp towel on your forehead can help reduce your temperature.

Where to get advice

- If you have a fever or high temperature that lasts longer than 48 hours ask for advice from a health professional.
- Ask your pharmacist or call **NHS Direct** on 0845 4647 for more advice.
- If you are still worried or your fever is accompanied by a severe headache, sickness, abdominal, neck or back pain and/or bright light bothers you and you feel drowsy and confused ask your pharmacist, a GP or call **NHS Direct** on 0845 46 47 for advice.



* Children under 16 years old and people with asthma should not take aspirin.

** If you are asthmatic speak to a GP before taking ibuprofen

Antibiotics

Most infections get better without antibiotics so you will not always be given a prescription. Your doctor will be able to recognise whether you have an infection that needs antibiotics.

Why overuse of antibiotics can be dangerous

Harmful bacteria can become resistant to antibiotics if you take them frequently. This may mean that the antibiotic won't work the next time you take it. Overuse can also affect the whole population, even people taking antibiotics for the first time. This is because the bacteria causing their infection could be new bacteria which are able to survive antibiotics.

Antibiotic facts

- Antibiotics have no effect on viruses (e.g colds, flu and most sore throats).
- Your body's defence system can often protect against infection without the need for antibiotics.
- Antibiotics do not just attack the infection they are prescribed for – they can also kill useful bacteria which normally protect you against other infections, like thrush.

Taking antibiotics

There are reasons why you should take prescribed antibiotics according to the instructions:

- Although you may begin to feel better, you must take the full course of antibiotics to prevent your illness coming back.
- Not taking the full course of antibiotics can lead to future antibiotic resistance.

Side-effects of antibiotics

Some antibiotic treatment can cause side-effects such as stomach upset, thrush, diarrhoea and allergic reactions. For women on the pill, some antibiotics can reduce contraceptive protection.

When and who to call for advice

Many infections can be treated with over-the-counter medicines. Ask your pharmacist for advice. Call **NHS Direct** on 0845 4647 or your GP surgery for advice if you or your child is experiencing any of the following:

- extreme shortness of breath
- coughing up blood or large amounts of yellow or green phlegm
- severe or prolonged symptoms.



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