Common Cold

Philosophy

The common cold is a viral infection that causes inflammation of the upper respiratory tract. It is the most common infectious disease among people of all ages. Although the common cold is benign and self-limiting, it can lead to secondary bacterial infections.

A cold can be spread two days before the carrier notices any cold symptoms. Usually, transmission occurs through airborne respiratory droplets and occasionally from objects contaminated with respiratory droplets.

Children serve as the main reservoir for respiratory viruses. They commonly acquire new strains from schoolmates and pass them on to family members.

Signs and Symptoms

- Sore throat and/or pharyngitis
- Nasal congestion
- Burning, watery eyes
- Fever (more common in children)
- Headache
- Cough
- Achiness
- Fatigue and weakness
- Enlarged lymph nodes

Secondary infections can result from a cold and need medical attention. A clinician should be seen if any of the following symptoms occur:

- Chest pain that persists
- Earache
- Severe or long-lasting sore throat
- Coughing up thick mucus or rusted colored sputum
- Many sore throats are not serious and resolve in time. Strep throat is the most potentially serious sore throat and is fairly common. This type of pharyngitis has potential to develop into heart and/or kidney disease.

Treatment

There is no cure for a cold since it is a viral infection. Primary treatment is purely symptomatic:

**Rest:** Plenty of rest allows the body to use the energy it needs to manufacture antibodies for killing viruses.

**Fluids:** Increase daily fluid intake to more than 1-2 liters. Liquids are needed to thin and loosen mucus secretions. Avoid milk and sodas.
Proper Diet: Do not “starve” a cold. Eat light, well-balanced meals.

Gargles: Gargle deeply to cleanse and heal the throat 2-4 times a day. Dissolve 1/4 tsp. of honey into 1/2 mug of warm water.

Vaporizer: Cool, moist air from a vaporizer helps break up congestion and thins secretions. Warm baths and showers are soothing. A hand towel wrung out with hot water and placed over the eyes and sinuses can also be soothing.

Medications

Analgesics: Aspirin, acetaminophen (TylenolTM), or ibuprofen (MotrinTM, AdvilTM) reduces fever and body aches.

Decongestants: Decongestants help relieve sinus stuffiness and pressure sensation in ears by reducing swollen mucus membranes. They are available as oral medications, nasal drops or sprays.

Cough medications: Prior to taking a cough medication, understand that coughs serve a useful purpose if something is in the lungs or excessive amounts of mucus are in the throat. A cough which brings up mucus is called a productive cough. There are essentially two types of cough medications: expectorants that help loosen mucus in productive coughs, and suppressants (or antitussives), which reduce or suppress the cough reflex in a nonproductive cough.

Antibiotics: Antibiotics do not cure the common cold since most colds result from viruses; however, they may be needed for secondary bacterial infections. To help prevent colds, minimize contact with people who are sick. Avoid spreading colds by washing your hands often and covering coughs and sneezes.