

COLDS:

Frequently Asked Questions

How do I know if I have a cold?

Symptoms of the common cold include more than one of the following:

- Runny and/or plugged nose
- Facial pressure
- Sore throat
- Sneezing
- Cough
- Ear pressure
- Red eyes
- Hoarse voice



The key is that there are multiple bothersome symptoms, not one predominant symptom.

What causes colds?

More than 200 different viruses cause colds.

My nasal discharge and phlegm are yellow and green. Doesn't this mean I need an antibiotic?

No. Discolored nasal secretions and phlegm are very common findings in viral respiratory infections.

How can the doctor/nurse tell when an illness is viral rather than bacterial?

As mentioned above, viral infections generally cause many symptoms or signs of illness. Bacterial infections, such as strep throat or an ear infection, tend to cause localized and more severe symptoms. The "common cold" is the leading cause of illness at Notre Dame (as well as a leading cause of missed school and work in the U.S.). We see thousands of colds a year among the students at ND. Therefore, we have a lot of experience taking care of colds and other respiratory illnesses, and differentiating viral infection from bacterial is an important element of our job.

How can I tell if I have sinusitis or bronchitis?

The suffix "-itis" simply indicates the presence of inflammation of the sinuses and bronchi, respectively. "Rarely" (studies show 0.5% of the time) what begins as a cold will develop into a bacterial sinus infection over a lengthy period. Similarly, "bronchitis" is typically caused by viruses as part of a cold, and "rarely" degenerates into a bacterial infection.

Do I need antibiotics?



Antibiotics do not benefit someone with a cold.

- they will not cure the infection
- they will not help you feel better
- they will not prevent you from developing more serious illness
- they will not keep others from getting your illness

Why have I been given antibiotics for similar symptoms in the past?

This is a complex question without an easy answer. Studies show that physicians often feel pressured into giving antibiotics due to patient expectation. It often takes more time to explain to a patient why they do not need an antibiotic than to simply write out a prescription for one. Additionally, in the past we were unaware of the impact on antibiotic resistant bacteria that overuse of antibiotics would cause.

Won't antibiotics make me feel better quicker?

No, not if you have a viral illness (i.e., cold). Antibiotics **do not** kill cold viruses.

I talked with my parents: they think I need an antibiotic. What should I tell them?

If you can't reassure your parents by telling them you have a cold based on the symptoms reviewed above, you may need to be checked by a nurse or doctor at the Health Center. If you have already seen a nurse or doctor regarding your illness, reassure your parents that you have seen a healthcare provider who sees many colds every day and is an expert in differentiating between colds and other respiratory ailments.

How long does a cold last?

Generally several days to two weeks. Oftentimes patients will complain that they have had a cold for longer than two weeks, though they report having had improvement for a few days before getting worse again. It is not unusual to be "getting over" a cold at which time you catch a second virus, making it seem like you have had one very long cold (instead of a succession of different colds).

Why do I seem to get so many colds here at Notre Dame?

Being in close proximity to others, especially when spending extra time indoors in dorms and classrooms, is a major factor. Transmission primarily occurs through person-to-person contact via secretions on hands, which find their way to environmental surfaces such as handrails, door knobs, desks, etc. In addition, college students do not typically get as much sleep as necessary to optimize the health of their immune systems, therefore predisposing them to more infections. *Caveat:* frequently wash hands and get eight hours of quality sleep a night to improve your chances of not getting sick



My cold symptoms have resolved except for my cough. How long will it last?

Cough is frequently the last cold symptom to resolve. One reason for this is that many cold viruses increase mucus production in the lungs, just as in the nose and sinuses. It takes more energy and time for the lungs to bring this mucus up to the trachea so that it can be coughed out. In essence, your lungs have to fight gravity in bringing this mucus up, and it takes awhile (sometimes weeks) for this to happen.

Are there ways in which I can reduce my chances of getting a cold?

As stated above, frequent hand washing is important. If someone with a cold who has contaminated hands touches a handrail, and you come along ten minutes later and touch the same handrail, you are at high risk of contracting their cold. Also, keeping your immune system in optimal health means getting adequate sleep (eight hours is a minimum), eating well, and exercising.

How can the doctor/nurse be so confident that what I have is the common cold?

The "common cold" is *common*...

It is estimated that there are 1 billion colds in the United States annually. We see thousands of colds every year at University Health Services. If there is any illness we see a lot of and are expert at, it is in diagnosing and recommending treatment for the cold.

Additional health information is available at University Health Services, St. Liam Hall.

You may also look up "common cold" at the following web sites:

<http://www.niaid.nih.gov>

<http://www.cdc.gov>

<http://uhs.nd.edu>