Viral Upper Respiratory Infections

A viral infection of the upper respiratory tract can make you miserable. If it's not a runny nose and watery eyes, it's a sore throat and a cough. Or maybe all of the above. In fact, because any one of more than 200 viruses can cause colds, symptoms tend to vary greatly. Unfortunately, if you're like most adults, you're likely to have two to four colds a year. Children, especially preschoolers, may have between five and nine infections annually. Colds are particularly prevalent among children attending child care. The good news is that after 4 to 5 days - a week at most - your cold should be better, although some symptoms may persist as long as 2 weeks. If a cold lasts longer than that, see your doctor to make sure you don't have a secondary bacterial infection in your lungs, larynx, trachea, sinuses or ears.

Signs and Symptoms

The onset of a cold usually occurs within 1 to 2 days after you're exposed to a cold virus. At first you may have all itching or sore throat, increased nasal congestion, or mild body aches or headache. But the first major symptom will likely be a watery nose. As your cold runs its course, the discharge from your nose may become thicker and yellowish. What makes a cold different from other viral infections is that you generally won't have a high fever. Other cold symptoms may include: sneezing, watery eyes, cough, low fever, runny nose, sore throat, and mild fatigue.

Causes

Although more than 200 viruses can cause colds, the rhinovirus is the most common culprit. A cold virus enters your body through your mouth or nose, but it's likely you also had a "hand" in your own illness. Although colds can be spread through sneezing and coughing, they are more often spread by hand-to-hand contact with a cold sufferer or by using shared objects such as utensils, towels or telephones. Touch your eyes or nose after such contact or exposure, and you're likely to acquire a cold.

Risk Factors

Children are especially likely to have colds. In fact, most children have their first cold before the age of 1 and are particularly susceptible until about age 6, when their immune system becomes more established. But an immature immune system isn't the only thing that makes kids vulnerable. They also tend to spend lots of time with other children and aren't always careful about washing their hands, which makes it easy for colds to spread. As an adult, you're more likely to come down with a cold when your resistance is low or your immune system is compromised by another illness. You're also more susceptible to colds in fall, winter and spring than in summer. And while lots of myths exist about how you catch cold -going outdoors with wet hair or getting chilled, for example - none of these has been shown in clinical studies to increase your risk.

When To Seek Medical Advice

Colds generally go away after less than a week, although they may not disappear as quickly as you'd like. You should seek medical attention if you have a fever greater than 102 F or feel your symptoms are getting worse. A high fever accompanied by achiness and fatigue might be the flu (influenza) rather than just a cold. Prescription antiviral medications for the flu are available and may be somewhat helpful, but you need to start taking them within 24 to 48 hours of your first symptoms. If you have fever, sweating, chills and a cough that produces colored phlegm, you might have pneumonia. It's best to see a doctor right away. Also see your doctor if your symptoms last longer than 2 weeks or you have a chronic illness that can put you at higher risk of complications. In general, children are sicker with colds than adults are, and often suffer from complications such as ear infections.

Complications

The most common complication of colds in children is an acute ear infection (otitis media), which occurs when bacteria infiltrate the space behind the eardrum. This is much less likely in adults. Other secondary infections that may develop following a cold include strep throat (pharyngitis), chronic bronchitis and pneumonia. These are more serious infections and need to be treated by your doctor.

Decongestant drops and sprays can be helpful for temporary relief of nasal congestion, but when overused can cause rebound congestion, which means that you may need to use more and more of these products to keep your nasal passages clear. Prolonged use can also cause chronic inflammation of the mucous membranes. If you use decongestant drops or sprays, follow the directions on the package.

Treatment

There's still no cure for the common cold but proper treatment can help relieve some of the symptoms. **Antibiotics are of no use against cold viruses**. Over-the-counter cold preparations may make you feel better, but they won't cure a cold or make it go away any sooner. For relief of fever or pain, acetaminophen (Tylenol) is preferred instead of aspirin. Aspirin might have a role in causing Reye's syndrome, a serious disease, in children younger than 16.

Prevention

Because so many different viruses can cause colds, no effective vaccine has been developed as yet. But though it may seem that colds are inevitable, you can take some commonsense precautions to slow the spread of cold viruses: Wash your hands frequently and teach your children the importance of hand washing. Keep kitchen and bathroom countertops clean, especially when someone in your family has a cold. Discard used tissues right away. Don't share drinking glasses with other family members. Use your own glass or disposable cups when you or someone else is sick. Look for a child-care setting with sound hygiene practices and clear policies about keeping sick children at home. If possible use a child-care center with a 5-to-1 or lower ratio of children to adults.

Hand washing: The simplest way to avoid infection

Self Care

You may not be able to shorten the duration of your cold, but you can make yourself as comfortable as possible. Drink lots of fluids and get plenty of rest. If you have a fever or a bad cough, or are drowsy from medications, consider staying home. This will give you a chance to rest as well as reduce the chances that you'll infect others. If you live or work with someone with a chronic disease or compromised immune system, wear a mask when you have a cold.

Keep your room warm but not overheated. If the air is dry, a cool mist humidifier or vaporizer can moisten the air and help ease congestion and coughing. Be sure to keep the humidifier clean, however, to prevent the growth of bacteria and molds.

Gargling with warm salt water (Mix 8 oz warm water, l tsp white vinegar, and 1/4 tsp of salt) several times a day may help sore throat. To help relieve nasal congestion, try Afrin Nasal Decongestant, 12 Hour, Moisturizing Nasal Spray.