

Medicine for Managers

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Common Cold

Thirty million working days are lost to colds each year. Colds may be caused by over two hundred viruses and the most common, *rhinovirus*, has about a hundred serotypes (variations). Colds may last up to three weeks and most adults catch two or three a year whilst children may catch up to a dozen. Often infection is with more than one virus at a time. Antibiotics & antivirals are ineffective.

Everyone knows what cold symptoms are like; the blocked or runny nose, the headache, the sneezing, sore throat and cough together with the feelings of tiredness and lethargy, weakness and generally feeling unwell.

Women have more colds than men, perhaps because of closer contact with children.

infected individual, and indirectly by touching the mouth or nose with a hand which has already touched, for example, a desk or door handle on which a sufferer has sneezed or coughed. It is not surprising that

schools, offices and underground trains are good sources of the viruses.

Other symptoms may be a temperature (around 38°C), muscle aching, loss of appetite and eye irritation. Simple colds tend to last about a week although the symptoms, and especially the cough, may last up to three weeks, particularly if the infection is with more than one virus at the same time. In children under five, colds may last 10-14 days.

Many years ago a GP in New Cross, London, displayed in his waiting room a sign which said "I can cure your cold in seven days. Treat it yourself and it will last a week"

Preventing the spread of colds depends on good personal hygiene. Spray from a sneeze may travel up to nine feet and so it is essential to cough or sneeze into a handkerchief or into a hand to avoid virus spread by droplets.

<http://www.nhsmanagers.net/guest-editorials/ae-its-also-a-marketing-problem/>

The cold viruses can be spread both directly by breathing in fluid droplets coughed or sneezed by an

Hand washing is essential after touching the

face, nose or handkerchiefs and especially before handling food or utensils used by others. Surfaces, particularly kitchen surfaces, should be thoroughly cleaned to maintain them germ free.

Treatment of colds is essentially symptomatic because antibiotics are completely ineffective against the causative viruses and antiviral drugs have also been shown to be ineffectual. Basic treatment is to drink plenty of fluids, rest and try to avoid infecting others. Headache and other aches and pains can be treated with paracetamol or ibuprofen. Sometimes decongestants such as *Sudafed* (pseudoephedrine) may provide symptomatic relief. Steam inhalations are useful.

A bowl of steaming water, into which can be placed Vick, Olbus Oil, menthol, eucalyptus or other proprietary products, is inhaled deeply, with a towel placed over the head.

The steam loosens and softens the mucus and makes it easier to cough up or remove by nose blowing. Some relief may also be provided with vapour rubs, inhalants and sweets containing menthol and local anaesthetic to ease a sore throat.

Sometimes viral debility caused by the cold exposes the patient to secondary bacterial infections and symptoms such as change of the sputum to thick and green, chest pain, breathlessness or a high temperature may indicate a complication. Such infections may be:

- Sinusitis causing facial pain and tenderness with nasal congestion

- Chest infection, either bronchitis or pneumonia, with persistent cough, breathlessness and worsening features of illness.
- Ear infection, particularly in younger children, with high temperature, earache and hearing loss.

These necessitate a visit to the GP and antibiotic may be required in such circumstances.

Many people who develop a cold describe themselves as having 'flu'. Influenza is usually a much more severe illness with high temperature, muscle pains, headache, weakness, discomfort, prostration, breathlessness and the need for confinement to bed for several days.

I shall leave the readers to assess the relationship between colds, influenza and 'man-flu'.

Suffice it to say that almost any man recognises 'man-flu' as very serious and needing constant attention from a sympathetic partner for many days!!

I add this comment in the knowledge that Roy Lilley had serious 'man-flu' only recently.

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