

Viral Respiratory Infection

A respiratory infection is an illness that affects part of the respiratory system, such as the lungs, nose, or throat. A respiratory infection that is caused by a virus is called a viral respiratory infection.

Common types of viral respiratory infections include:

- A cold.
- The flu (*influenza*).
- A respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) infection.

What are the causes?

This condition is caused by a virus.

What are the signs or symptoms?

Symptoms of this condition include:

- A stuffy or runny nose.
- Yellow or green nasal discharge.
- A cough.
- Sneezing.
- Fatigue.
- Achy muscles.
- A sore throat.
- Sweating or chills.
- A fever.
- A headache.

How is this diagnosed?

This condition may be diagnosed based on:

- Your symptoms.
- A physical exam.
- Testing of nasal swabs.

How is this treated?

This condition may be treated with medicines, such as:

- Antiviral medicine. This may shorten the length of time a person has symptoms.
- Expectorants. These make it easier to cough up mucus.
- Decongestant nasal sprays.
- Acetaminophen or NSAIDs to relieve fever and pain.

Antibiotic medicines are not prescribed for viral infections. This is because antibiotics are designed to kill bacteria. They are not effective against viruses.

Follow these instructions at home:

Managing pain and congestion

- Take over-the-counter and prescription medicines only as told by your health care provider.
- If you have a sore throat, gargle with a salt-water mixture 3–4 times a day or as needed. To make a salt-water mixture, completely dissolve ½–1 tsp of salt in 1 cup of warm water.
- Use nose drops made from salt water to ease congestion and soften raw skin around your nose.
- Drink enough fluid to keep your urine pale yellow. This helps prevent dehydration and helps loosen up mucus.

General instructions

- Rest as much as possible.
- **Do not** drink alcohol.
- **Do not** use any products that contain nicotine or tobacco, such as cigarettes and e-cigarettes. If you need help quitting, ask your health care provider.
- Keep all follow-up visits as told by your health care provider. This is important.



How is this prevented?

- Get an annual flu shot. You may get the flu shot in late summer, fall, or winter. Ask your health care provider when you should get your flu shot.
- Avoid exposing others to your respiratory infection.
 - Stay home from work or school as told by your health care provider.
 - Wash your hands with soap and water often, especially after you cough or sneeze. If soap and water are not available, use alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Avoid contact with people who are sick during cold and flu season. This is generally fall and winter.



Contact a health care provider if:

- Your symptoms last for 10 days or longer.
- Your symptoms get worse over time.
- You have a fever.
- You have severe sinus pain in your face or forehead.
- The glands in your jaw or neck become very swollen.

Get help right away if you:

- Feel pain or pressure in your chest.
- Have shortness of breath.
- Faint or feel like you will faint.
- Have severe and persistent vomiting.
- Feel confused or disoriented.

Summary

- A respiratory infection is an illness that affects part of the respiratory system, such as the lungs, nose, or throat. A respiratory infection that is caused by a virus is called a viral respiratory infection.
- Common types of viral respiratory infections are a cold, influenza, and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) infection.
- Symptoms of this condition include a stuffy or runny nose, cough, sneezing, fatigue, achy muscles, sore throat, and fevers or chills.
- Antibiotic medicines are not prescribed for viral infections. This is because antibiotics are designed to kill bacteria. They are not effective against viruses.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.

Document Released: 09/27/2006 Document Revised: 12/26/2019 Document Reviewed: 01/28/2019
Elsevier Interactive Patient Education © 2020 Elsevier Inc.