

# Upper Respiratory Infection, Adult

An upper respiratory infection (URI) is a common viral infection of the nose, throat, and upper air passages that lead to the lungs. The most common type of URI is the common cold. URIs usually get better on their own, without medical treatment.

## What are the causes?

A URI is caused by a virus. You may catch a virus by:

- Breathing in droplets from an infected person's cough or sneeze.
- Touching something that has been exposed to the virus (*contaminated*) and then touching your mouth, nose, or eyes.

## What increases the risk?

You are more likely to get a URI if:

- You are very young or very old.
- It is autumn or winter.
- You have close contact with others, such as at a daycare, school, or health care facility.
- You smoke.
- You have long-term (*chronic*) heart or lung disease.
- You have a weakened disease-fighting (*immune*) system.
- You have nasal allergies or asthma.
- You are experiencing a lot of stress.
- You work in an area that has poor air circulation.
- You have poor nutrition.

## What are the signs or symptoms?

A URI usually involves some of the following symptoms:

- Runny or stuffy (*congested*) nose.
- Sneezing.
- Cough.
- Sore throat.
- Headache.
- Fatigue.
- Fever.
- Loss of appetite.
- Pain in your forehead, behind your eyes, and over your cheekbones (*sinus* pain).
- Muscle aches.
- Redness or irritation of the eyes.
- Pressure in the ears or face.

## How is this diagnosed?

This condition may be diagnosed based on your medical history and symptoms, and a physical exam. Your health care provider may use a cotton swab to take a mucus sample from your nose (*nasal swab*). This sample can be tested to determine what virus is causing the illness.

## How is this treated?

URIs usually get better on their own within 7–10 days. You can take steps at home to relieve your symptoms. Medicines cannot cure URIs, but your health care provider may recommend certain medicines to help relieve symptoms, such as:

- Over-the-counter cold medicines.
- Cough suppressants. Coughing is a type of defense against infection that helps to clear the respiratory system, so take these medicines only as recommended by your health care provider.
- Fever-reducing medicines.

## Follow these instructions at home:

### Activity

- Rest as needed.
- If you have a fever, stay home from work or school until your fever is gone or until your health care provider says you are no longer contagious. Your health care provider may have you wear a face mask to prevent your infection from spreading.

### Relieving symptoms

- Gargle with a salt-water mixture 3–4 times a day or as needed. To make a salt-water mixture, completely dissolve  $\frac{1}{2}$ –1 tsp of salt in 1 cup of warm water.
- Use a cool-mist humidifier to add moisture to the air. This can help you breathe more easily.

### Eating and drinking

- Drink enough fluid to keep your urine pale yellow.
- Eat soups and other clear broths.



### General instructions

- Take over-the-counter and prescription medicines only as told by your health care provider. These include cold medicines, fever reducers, and cough suppressants.
- **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.
- Stay away from secondhand smoke.
- Stay up to date on all immunizations, including the yearly (*annual*) flu vaccine.
- Keep all follow-up visits as told by your health care provider. This is important.



### How to prevent the spread of infection to others

- URIs can be passed from person to person (are *contagious*). To prevent the infection from spreading:
  - Wash your hands often with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use hand sanitizer.
  - Avoid touching your mouth, face, eyes, or nose.
  - Cough or sneeze into a tissue or your sleeve or elbow instead of into your hand or into the air.



## Contact a health care provider if:

- You are getting worse instead of better.
- You have a fever or chills.
- Your mucus is brown or red.
- You have yellow or brown discharge coming from your nose.
- You have pain in your face, especially when you bend forward.
- You have swollen neck glands.
- You have pain while swallowing.
- You have white areas in the back of your throat.

## Get help right away if:

- You have shortness of breath that gets worse.
- You have severe or persistent:
  - Headache.
  - Ear pain.
  - Sinus pain.
  - Chest pain.
- You have chronic lung disease along with any of the following:
  - Wheezing.
  - Prolonged cough.
  - Coughing up blood.
  - A change in your usual mucus.
- You have a stiff neck.
- You have changes in your:
  - Vision.
  - Hearing.
  - Thinking.
  - Mood.

## Summary

- An upper respiratory infection (URI) is a common infection of the nose, throat, and upper air passages that lead to the lungs.
- A URI is caused by a virus.
- URIs usually get better on their own within 7–10 days.
- Medicines cannot cure URIs, but your health care provider may recommend certain medicines to help relieve symptoms.

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.