

Sore Throats, Colds, and Flu: A Self-Care Guide

Most sore throats are caused by viral infections, which are responsible for the common cold and the flu. The symptoms of both conditions are similar – sore throat, headache, congestion, cough, and fever. But colds are more likely to be accompanied by a stuffy or runny nose, sneezing, and a wet cough. In contrast, the flu is more likely to be accompanied by chills, body aches, muscle pain, weakness, and a dry cough. Flu symptoms start suddenly and escalate rapidly.

To reduce the severity and duration of a cold:

- Use Zicam Cold Remedy Nasal Gel within 24 hours of start of symptoms (costs about \$9.00).
- Irrigate twice a day with saline nasal spray (costs about \$2.00 for generic).
- Use oxymetazoline nasal spray, but for no more than 4 days (costs about \$3.25 for generic).
- Start using zinc gluconate or zinc acetate lozenges without vitamin C or sweetener at the first sign of symptoms. Take 1 lozenge every 2 hours, and let it slowly dissolve in mouth.

All of the above products are available over-the-counter (OTC).

Cold and Flu Symptom Guide

Symptom	What You Can Do
Stuffy Nose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vaporizers, humidifiers, and steamy showers help thin mucus and make clearing nasal passages easier. Nasal saline is helpful too. Be sure the vaporizer or humidifier is cleaned regularly to prevent reinfection from spores and bacteria. • Eat hot, spicy foods to help thin secretions, but don't eat if you have no appetite. • Avoid dairy products since they thicken mucus. • Sleep with your head elevated so nasal passages can drain. • If stuffiness makes sleep difficult use OTC nasal sprays or drops (like oxymetazoline), but for no more than 4 days. Sudafed (pseudoephedrine) pills also help with stuffiness day or night, but cause insomnia in some people.
Runny Nose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blow your nose with steady, gentle pressure. Forceful blowing can send virus-laden secretions into the canal connecting the nose and ear which could cause an ear infection.
Sore Throat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start using zinc gluconate or zinc acetate lozenges without vitamin C or sweetener at the first sign of symptoms. Take 1 lozenge every 2 hours, and let it slowly dissolve in mouth. Zinc is a trace mineral that has an essential role in immune response. • Gargle with salt water – 1/4 teaspoon salt in 8 oz. warm water – to soothe irritated tissue. • Take an OTC pain reliever (Tylenol, Advil, Aleve). • Use a vaporizer or a humidifier, suck hard candy – both will help to keep the throat moist.
Cough	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If cough is dry, use cough drops to help keep throat moist. • If dry cough disturbs sleep or daily routine, an OTC cough suppressant containing dextromethorphan hydrobromide can be helpful to moisten cough. • If cough is productive, water, especially in the form of hot soup or herb tea, is the best expectorant or mucus thinner. • Also helpful: humidifiers, steamy showers, hot spicy foods, hot lemon water with honey. • Avoid dairy products since they thicken mucus.

Lung Congestion/ Wheezing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See self-care tips for productive cough. • Drink green tea (steep in boiling water for 3 – 5 minutes) because it dilates the bronchial tubes a bit, making breathing easier.
Chills and Fever	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drink as much water and juice as is comfortably possible (aim for two quarts a day). Most of the discomfort attributed to fever – all-over malaise and occasionally delirium – are often side effects of dehydration. Remember fever is a good sign the body is fighting the infection (killing the virus). • Take an OTC fever reducer (Tylenol, Advil, Aleve) for fever over 101F.
Dizziness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep your head as still as possible to keep down the dizzy feeling. • Drink salty liquids (bouillon, chicken soup) to replenish the body’s salt supply depleted by fever-induced dehydration.
Headache	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take an OTC pain reliever (Tylenol, Advil, Aleve). • See self-care advice for relieving a stuffy nose. This headache is different from a muscle-tension headache. The goal here is to relieve congestion, and then pain relief will follow.

Antibiotics are of no value in treating colds and flu. Antibiotics are effective for treating bacterial infections – colds and flu are caused by a wide variety of viruses.

When to Seek Medical Care

You should see a healthcare provider if you experience any of the following:

- Stiff neck
- Severe, worsening, or prolonged throat pain lasting more than 4 days without improvement, especially with fever over 101F
- Fever over 101F for longer than three days or fever goes above 103.5F
- Earache
- Skin or mouth rash
- Hard, tender, or swollen lymph nodes in the neck or behind the ears
- Recent exposure to someone with strep throat
- Hoarseness lasting more than 10 days
- Cough lasting more than 10 days
- Coughing up yellow-green mucus
- Thick, yellow-green nasal discharge or runny/stuffy nose lasting more than 1 week
- Difficulty breathing
- Chest pain that occurs with breathing
- Other symptoms of illness not progressively resolving after 7 – 10 days

Frequent hand washing and sneezing into facial tissues (that are promptly thrown away) are the easiest and most effective ways to prevent the spread of colds and flu.

Most colds generally take a week or so to resolve, while the flu may last for up to 2 weeks.