

COMMON COLD IN ADULTS

1 CONDITION OVERVIEW

What It Is:

A common cold is a viral infection of the nose, throat, and upper airways. Adults usually get 2–3 colds each year.

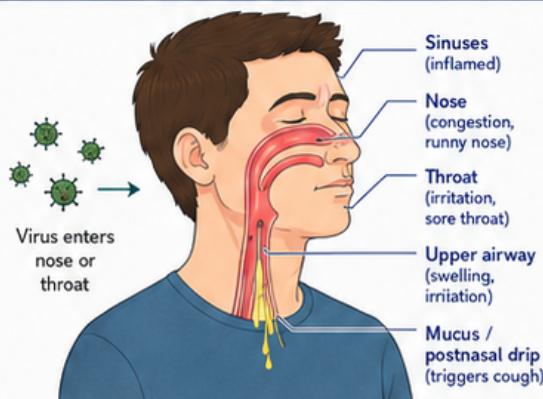
Why It Happens:

Cold viruses spread through coughs, sneezes, close contact, and shared surfaces. Many different respiratory viruses can cause cold symptoms.

Why It Matters:

Most colds improve with home care, but some illnesses can look similar or become more serious. Knowing when to watch, when to go to urgent care, and when to go to the ER helps you act confidently.

2 CENTRAL ILLUSTRATION



A common cold affects the upper airway and usually improves with time.

3 WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE BODY

- A respiratory virus infects the lining of the nose and throat.
- The immune system reacts, causing swelling, mucus, and irritation.
- Mucus can drip down the throat and trigger cough.
- Symptoms often peak within 2–3 days, then gradually improve.
- Worsening after improvement can suggest another illness or complication.

4 COMMON CAUSES / TRIGGERS

- Exposure to cold viruses at work, home, travel, or crowded indoor spaces
- Close contact with coughing or sneezing people
- Shared surfaces and frequent hand-to-face contact
- Seasonal respiratory virus circulation
- Smoking or secondhand smoke exposure worsening symptoms
- Chronic illness increasing complication risk

5 SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

A cold usually causes nose, throat, and cough symptoms that build over a few days and gradually improve.

COMMON SYMPTOMS

- Runny or stuffy nose
- Sneezing
- Sore throat
- Cough
- Headache or mild body aches
- Fatigue
- Low-grade fever

LESS COMMON SYMPTOMS

- Hoarse voice
- Watery eyes
- Mild sinus pressure
- Ear pressure
- Reduced appetite
- Poor sleep from congestion
- Nausea from heavy postnasal drip

6 WHAT TO EXPECT AT URGENT CARE

- Review of symptoms, risk factors, and illness timeline
- Check of breathing, hydration, temperature, throat, ears, sinuses, and lungs
- Testing when flu, COVID-19, or another illness is suspected
- Evaluation for complications such as sinus infection, pneumonia, asthma flare, or worsening chronic disease
- Supportive care plan and safe OTC guidance
- Clear instructions for when to return or seek emergency care

7 WHEN TO SEEK CARE

WHAT YOU CAN DO AT HOME

- ✓ Rest and drink plenty of fluids.
- ✓ Use a humidifier or steam for comfort.
- ✓ Use saline nasal spray or drops.
- ✓ Gargle warm salt water for sore throat.
- ✓ Use honey to soothe cough.
- ✓ Use OTC symptom medicines as directed if appropriate.
- ✓ Avoid smoke exposure.
- ✓ Watch for worsening symptoms, dehydration, or breathing trouble.



Home care is reasonable when symptoms are mild, breathing is comfortable, and symptoms are gradually improving.

WHEN TO GO TO URGENT CARE

- Symptoms last more than 10 days without improvement
- Symptoms improve, then return or worsen
- Persistent fever or worsening cough
- Significant sinus pain, facial pressure, or ear pain
- Trouble managing symptoms or dehydration
- Asthma, COPD, or another chronic condition getting worse
- Concern for flu, COVID-19, or another diagnosis



Urgent care helps check for complications and decide whether testing or a different treatment plan is needed.

WHEN TO GO TO THE ER

- ⚠ Severe trouble breathing
- ⚠ Blue lips
- ⚠ Chest pain
- ⚠ Confusion or inability to stay awake
- ⚠ Severe dehydration
- ⚠ Rapid worsening or signs of severe illness



Go to the ER for severe breathing problems, chest pain, serious dehydration, or major worsening.

8 EXPECTED COURSE / TIMELINE



Interpretation: A cold should gradually improve. Symptoms that last too long or worsen after improvement should be checked.

9 EASY TO CONFUSE WITH

- **Flu** — Often causes fever, chills, stronger body aches, and more intense fatigue.
- **COVID-19** — Can look like a cold but may need testing, especially in higher-risk adults.
- **Allergies or sinus infection** — May also cause congestion and runny nose but follow a different pattern.



Sinusitis
Facial pain, pressure, and thick nasal discharge.



Bronchitis
Worse cough with chest congestion or wheezing.

10 QUICK FACTS

- Colds are caused by viruses, not bacteria.
- Adults average about 2–3 colds each year.
- Antibiotics do not treat a typical cold.
- Symptoms often peak around days 2–3.
- Yellow or green mucus can happen during a normal cold.
- Some symptoms such as cough may last 10–14 days.

11 PREVENTION & PRACTICAL TIPS

- Wash hands often.
- Avoid touching your face.
- Cover coughs and sneezes.
- Clean commonly touched surfaces.
- Use a humidifier in indoor spaces.
- Stay home when significantly ill to reduce spread.

12 WARNING SIGNS RECAP

- Severe trouble breathing
- Blue lips
- Chest pain
- Confusion or inability to stay awake
- Severe dehydration
- Symptoms lasting more than 10 days without improvement
- Symptoms improve, then worsen again

