

Diagnosis

- Upper respiratory tract infections or “the common cold” are caused by viruses and present with symptoms such as rhinorrhea, sneezing, sinus congestion, sore throat, cough, low-grade fever, headache, and fatigue.
- The common cold occurs throughout the year.
- The color of nasal discharge does not differentiate a viral infection from a bacterial one.
- The physical examination should focus on identifying alternative diagnoses:
 - Acute diagnoses that could change management, such as otitis media, streptococcal pharyngitis, or pneumonia
 - Exacerbations of chronic medical conditions, such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), or heart failure
- For recurrent or chronic symptoms, consider allergic or seasonal rhinitis.

Treatment

- Antibiotics are not indicated for the treatment of the common cold.¹
- Patients should be advised to rest and stay hydrated.
- Consider the following treatments for symptom management in adults and children ≥ 6 years of age:²⁻⁵
 - Analgesics (acetaminophen and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs): help reduce fever and pain
 - Systemic decongestants: may decrease nasal congestion
 - Antihistamine/decongestant and antihistamine/decongestant/analgesic combinations: may reduce congestion; combinations with analgesics may also reduce fever and pain
 - Nasal decongestants: may reduce rhinorrhea
 - Honey: may soothe sore throat
 - Beta-agonists: if airflow obstruction is present, may improve cough
 - Codeine and benzonatate: can suppress cough
 - Nasal ipratropium bromide: can decrease rhinorrhea
- The American Academy of Pediatrics does not recommend cough and cold medicines for children < 6 years, and does not generally recommend cough and cold medicines for children 6–12 years because of reports of harm, including apnea and serious overdoses.^{6,7}
- Consider the following treatments for symptom management in the pediatric population:
 - Honey: for sore throat (ONLY for children over 1 year of age)⁸
 - Cool-mist humidifier: for sore throat and congestion
 - Nasal saline drops and bulb suctioning for infants

Prevention

- Common cold viruses are spread by hand contact and droplets. To avoid transmission to others, encourage frequent hand washing, cough and sneeze into a tissue or into the arm rather than the hand, wear a face mask, and avoid touching the face.
- The incubation period for most viral causes of the common cold is 1–3 days and patients may be infectious as long as symptoms are present.

Followup

- Complications are rare and include bacterial sinusitis, bronchiolitis or pneumonia, acute otitis media, and exacerbations of chronic conditions such as asthma, COPD, or heart failure.
- Antibiotic treatment does not prevent complications.⁹
- Symptoms usually last about 1 week and up to 2 weeks; dry cough may last up to 3 weeks and sometimes even longer.
- Patients should be instructed to contact the clinic or go to the emergency department if symptoms have not improved after 10 days; or if they develop a high fever (above 102°F), confusion, difficulty breathing or swallowing, severe headache, pain in the face or forehead, or severe fatigue.

References

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