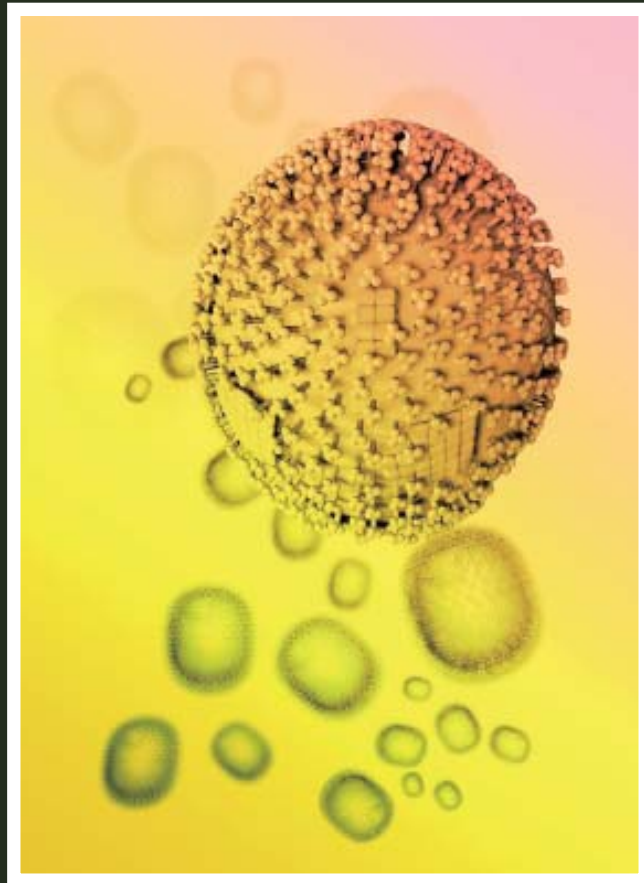


Student Health Centre

Respiratory Tract Infection (Common Cold)



Introduction

How common are respiratory tract infections? Respiratory tract infections are very common. They are believed to be one of the main reasons why people visit their GP or pharmacist. Respiratory tract infections are more common during the winter. This is possibly due to the fact that during the winter months people are more likely to stay inside and in close contact with each other.

Symptoms



Upper Respiratory tract infections.

A cough is the most common symptom of an upper respiratory tract infection.

Other symptoms include:

headaches - stuffed or runny nose - sore throat - sneezing

Most upper respiratory tract infections are self-limiting, which means that they usually pass within one to two weeks.

Lower respiratory tract infections

As with an upper respiratory tract infection, the main symptom of a lower respiratory tract infection is a cough, although it is usually more severe and more productive (bringing up phlegm and mucus). Sometimes the mucus is blood-stained.



Other symptoms of a lower respiratory tract infection include:

a tight feeling in your chest - breathlessness - wheezing - sore throat - fever and chills - headaches - blocked nose and sinuses - aches and pains

When to seek medical advice

Most respiratory tract infections do not require medical attention and can be treated at home. However, it is recommended that you visit your GP if:

Your symptoms suggest that you may have pneumonia, such as coughing up bloody mucus and phlegm.

You are feeling very unwell.

You have a pre-existing heart, lung, liver, or kidney condition, or weakened immunity.

Causes

Causes of respiratory tract infections

Most upper respiratory tract infections are caused by viruses. There are more than two hundred different viruses that can cause a respiratory tract infection. The most common respiratory tract infection is a cold. The number of different viruses that can cause a cold is the reason why it is possible to have several colds, one after the other, with each one being caused by a different virus. Most lower respiratory tract infections are also caused by viruses. The exception is pneumonia, which is usually caused by streptococcus pneumonia bacteria.

Self care

Most respiratory tract infections can be treated using some self-care techniques, such as those outlined below.

*Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, can help to relieve the symptoms of pain and fever.

*Drink plenty of non-alcoholic fluids to keep yourself hydrated – this is particularly important for children. Water is best, although warm drinks can be soothing.

*Try to rest and avoid strenuous activity.

*Keep the room at a comfortable temperature, but make sure that fresh air is circulating.

*A cough medicine may help to soothe a ticklish or dry cough. Over-the-counter (OTC) products that are available from your local pharmacist are often sold as combined remedies for treating a cough and cold.

*Smoke irritates the nose and throat. Therefore, try to avoid being around people who smoke, and stay away from smoke-filled environments. If you are a smoker, try to smoke as little as possible while you are feeling unwell.

* Raising the head of your bed slightly, by placing a pillow under the mattress, may help reduce coughing at night.

Contact your GP if your symptoms do not improve within two weeks.

Antibiotics are not usually recommended for treating respiratory tract infections.

This is because:

Most respiratory tract infections are not caused by bacteria.

Even if your respiratory tract infection is caused by bacteria, antibiotics have proven to be no more effective in treating these cases than paracetamol, and they may cause unpleasant side effects.

Over-using antibiotics to treat minor ailments can make them less effective in the treatment of more serious, or life-threatening, conditions.

Who should take antibiotics?

Antibiotics are only recommended if:

You have pneumonia because this is usually caused by a bacterial infection.

You have a pre-existing health condition.

There are personal circumstances that could lead to serious complications arising from a respiratory tract infection.

Stopping the spread of infection

If you develop a respiratory tract infection, it is important to take steps to prevent spreading the infection to other people.

These steps are outlined below.

Washing your hands regularly and thoroughly, particularly after touching your nose or mouth, and before handling food
Sneezing and coughing into tissues. This will help prevent the virus-containing droplets from your nose and mouth entering the air where they can infect others.

Throw away used tissues immediately before washing your hands.

Do not share cups or kitchen utensils with others. Use your own cup, plates and cutlery.