

How to prevent and treat a cold

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Stuffy or runny noses and sore throats are common signs of a cold and can make us feel miserable, but are there effective ways to treat a cold or even prevent catching one? Baylor College of Medicine's Isabel Valdez offers her tips.

"The average cold is from a virus that triggers symptoms, usually in the

[upper respiratory tract](#) so that means your sinuses, ears, nose, throat and lungs," said Valdez, a physician assistant and instructor of general internal medicine. "A cold can last seven to 14 days in some cases, and it typically goes away on its own."

Prevention

Although it is likely that at some point you are going to get a cold because it is an airborne virus, Valdez said it is important that you prepare your body as much as you can to the risk of exposure. This means every day you should wash your hands, eat right, stay hydrated, exercise and practice good sleep hygiene. Valdez pointed to a study that showed that people who sleep fewer than five hours may be more likely to get sick than those who sleep seven hours.

While you may be tempted to reach for echinacea, an [herbal remedy](#), to prevent a cold, Valdez said that the evidence is not clear to support that it is actually helpful.

Treatment

There are some studies that support using zinc lozenges or syrup to help shorten the duration of your cold symptoms, Valdez said.

Sore throat: For a [sore throat](#), Valdez recommends drinking hot tea during the day, gargling warm saltwater and using over-the-counter lozenges.

Stuffy or [runny nose](#) and congestion: If your [blood pressure](#) is normal, Valdez said you can try taking behind-the-counter pseudoephedrine. Depending on the dose, you might be able to take one or two tablets with meals but do not take it too close to bedtime because it may keep you up

at night.

You also can try over-the-counter nasal steroids, which can help with congestion and postnasal drainage. To use the spray, look down and gently inhale the spray as directed into the nostrils. Spray once or twice into each nostril once a day.

Cough: For a [cough](#), Valdez recommended using over-the-counter dextromethorphan as directed.

When to see your doctor

As soon as you have a fever you should see your doctor, Valdez warned, especially if your fever is higher than 101 degrees. This could signal that you may have the flu, pneumonia or bronchitis. Some medicines need to be started within one to two days of when the fever begins so try to see your doctor as soon as you can. You also should see your doctor if your symptoms persist for more than two weeks.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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