

Home remedies: Cold remedies that work

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Cold remedies are almost as common as the common cold, but are they effective? Nothing can cure a cold, but there are some remedies that might help ease your symptoms and keep you from feeling so miserable.

Here's a look at some common cold remedies and what's known about them.

If you catch a cold, you can expect to be sick for one to two weeks. That doesn't mean you have to be miserable. These remedies might help you feel better.

Cold remedies that work

Stay hydrated.

Water, juice, clear broth or warm lemon water with honey helps loosen congestion and prevents dehydration. Avoid alcohol, coffee and caffeinated drinks, which can make dehydration worse.

Rest.

Your body needs to heal.

Soothe a sore throat.

A saltwater gargle—1/4 to 1/2 teaspoon of salt dissolved in an 8-ounce glass of warm water—can temporarily relieve a sore or scratchy throat. Children under 6 are unlikely to be able to gargle properly. You can also try ice chips, sore-throat sprays, lozenges or hard candy. Don't give lozenges or hard candy to [children](#) under 4 because they can choke on them.

Combat stuffiness.

Over-the-counter saline nasal drops and sprays can help relieve stuffiness and congestion. In infants, experts recommend putting several saline drops into one nostril, and then gently suctioning that nostril with a

bulb syringe. To do this, squeeze the bulb, gently place the syringe tip in the nostril to { inch and slowly release the bulb. Saline nasal sprays may be used in [older children](#).

Relieve pain.

For children 6 months old or younger, give only acetaminophen. For children older than 6 months, give either acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Ask your child's [health care provider](#) for the correct dose for your child's age and weight. Adults can take acetaminophen (Tylenol, others), ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin IB, others) or aspirin. Use caution when giving aspirin to children or teenagers. Though aspirin is approved for use in children over 3, children and teenagers recovering from chickenpox or flu-like symptoms should never take aspirin because it has been linked to Reye's syndrome, a rare but potentially life-threatening condition, in such children.

Sip warm liquids.

A cold [remedy](#) used in many cultures, taking warm liquids such as chicken soup, tea or warm apple juice, might be soothing and ease congestion by increasing mucus flow.

Add moisture to the air.

A cool mist vaporizer or humidifier can add moisture to your home, which might help loosen congestion. Change the water daily, and clean the unit according to the manufacturer's instructions. Don't use steam, which hasn't been shown to help and may cause burns. Try over-the-counter cold and cough medications.

Relieve pain.

For adults and children over 5, OTC decongestants, antihistamines and pain relievers might help. However, they won't prevent a cold or shorten its duration, and most have some side effects. Experts agree that these shouldn't be given to younger children. Overuse and misuse of these medications can cause serious damage. Take medications only as directed. Some cold remedies contain multiple ingredients, such as a decongestant plus a pain reliever, so read the labels of cold medications you take to make sure you're not taking too much of any medication.

Cold remedies that don't work

The list of ineffective cold remedies is long. Some of the more common ones that don't work include:

Antibiotics.

These attack bacteria, but they're no help against cold viruses. Avoid asking your doctor for antibiotics for a cold or using old antibiotics you have on hand. You won't get well any faster, and inappropriate use of antibiotics contributes to the serious and growing problem of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

Over-the-counter cold and cough medications in young children.

OTC cold and cough medications may cause serious and even life-threatening side effects in children. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration warns against their use in children under 6.

Cold remedies with conflicting evidence

In spite of ongoing studies, the scientific jury is still out on some popular cold remedies, such as vitamin C and echinacea. Here's an update on

some common alternative remedies:

Vitamin C.

It appears that for the most part taking vitamin C won't help the average person prevent colds. However, taking vitamin C before the onset of cold symptoms may shorten the duration of symptoms. Vitamin C may benefit people at high risk of colds due to frequent exposure—for example, children who attend group child care during the winter.

Echinacea.

Study results on whether echinacea prevents or shortens colds are mixed. Some studies show no benefit. Others show some reduction in the severity and duration of cold symptoms when taken in the early stages of a cold. Different types of echinacea used in different studies may have contributed to the differing results. Echinacea seems to be most effective if you take it when you notice cold symptoms and continue it for 7 to 10 days. It appears to be safe for healthy adults, but it can interact with many drugs. Check with your health care provider before taking echinacea or any other supplement.

Zinc.

There's been a lot of talk about taking zinc for colds since a 1984 study showed that zinc supplements lessened cold symptoms. Research since has had mixed results. Some studies show that zinc lozenges or syrup reduces the length of a cold by one day, especially when taken within 24 hours of the first signs of a cold. Zinc also has potentially harmful side effects. Talk to your health care provider before considering the use of zinc to prevent or reduce the length of colds.

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