

All About Colds and Flu

Colds and viruses are spread by transferring droplets of fluid from your nose, eyes or mouth.

There are some 200 strains of the cold virus, none of which come from rain, water puddles, or cold air. The bottom line is that science has proven that **colds come from viruses; viruses usually come from other people**, and there is a **direct correlation between the condition of your body and your likelihood of catching a cold or some other virus.**

A person becomes more susceptible to developing a full-blown infection from a virus if his or her immune system is compromised by fatigue, stress, a poor diet, too much alcohol, too much tobacco use or, say, wreaking havoc on your internal thermostat by going from a warm, dry environment to a cold, wet environment and back and forth...air-conditioned office buildings for example!

This may be prevented by a number of means.

These include (1) keeping your hands away from your eyes, nose and mouth; (2) hand washing with plenty of soap and water; (3) not sharing cups and cutlery; (4) using paper tissues to blow your nose and throwing them away after use; (5) remembering to wash your hands after covering your mouth for a sneeze; (6) wiping door knobs and other surfaces touched by an infected person in your office; (7) wearing a good filtering face mask near infected persons; and (8) making your home a smoke-free zone as smoke can irritate the nose and lungs and may increase a child's susceptibility to a cold.

Medical professors at teaching hospitals and universities in Taiwan are now recommending that people do not see doctors for trivial ailments like the common cold, and as at 2005, the government is seriously considering removing the common cold medicines from the list of "essential" medicines covered by the subsidized NHI scheme. A vaccine is available to protect you from influenza (the flu). It will not stop the common cold. The flu vaccine is recommended for all people 65 years and over with a chronic illness such as asthma, diabetes and kidney problems.

Treatments that may shorten the duration of major symptoms of influenza by an average of 1 to 1.5 days are now available. These must be started within 30 hours of the onset of symptoms for greatest benefit. It is important that if you do take these

medicines and your symptoms worsen or do not improve (particularly if you have respiratory problems); you should see your doctor.

In any case, you should take a child to see a doctor if they have the following symptoms:

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| 1. is not improving; | 5. has a sore throat; |
| 2. is very irritable, grizzly or
sleepy; | 6. has sore ears; |
| 3. breathes very fast; | 7. coughs a lot; or |
| 4. refuses food or drinks; | 8. has a mild fever. |

So what is a cold not?

Most people refer to a cold as “the flu”, but influenza is a specific viral illness quite different from a cold. This tends to occur in small outbreaks or epidemics. Up to 15% of people over 20 years old, catch the flu every year.

The flu has the following symptoms, which distinguish it from a cold.

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| 1) sudden or rapid onset of symptoms; | 4) headache |
| 2) high temperature; | 5) weakness and aching muscles; |
| 3) chills and fever; | 6) loss of appetite. |

Most flu symptoms usually clear in 7 to 10 days. Nevertheless, antibiotics are not useful against viruses. They are only useful against bacteria.

So what are bacterial infections?

Bacterial infections may also cause cold or flu-like symptoms but they are more often responsible for **infection in one particular site**, such as the ear, tonsils or sinuses.

It is important to remember the following.

◆ **Viral infections are not affected by antibiotics.** Because colds and flu are caused by viruses, they cannot be cured by antibiotics. Your body’s own immune system will attack and kill the virus in a few days. The average adult human body is constantly host to dozens if not scores of viruses. Some viruses you will carry around for the rest of your life...your healthy immune system keeping them constantly in check. If your doctor assesses your symptoms and believes you have a viral illness, then you should not be prescribed antibiotics. Antibiotics do not stop a cold from getting worse.

◆ Indeed, the following situations are alarming:

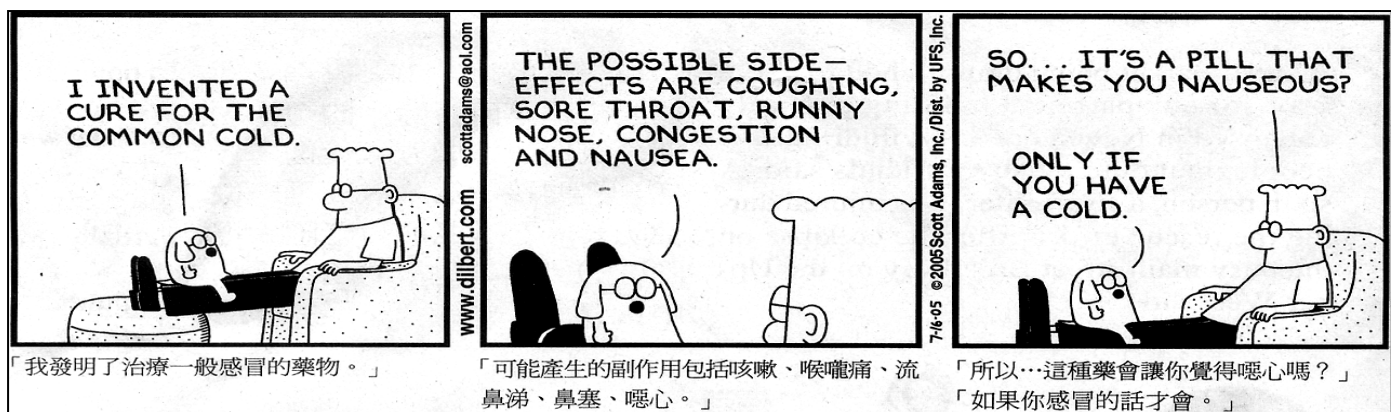
1. Many doctors in Taiwan irresponsibly prescribe antibiotics for colds, and this has led to the runaway resistance of bacteria to antibiotics.
2. Doctors here generally give patients 2 to 3 days prescription of an antibiotics course in any one visit. To be fully effective, a full course of treatment should be **prescribed** and **taken** for 7 to 10 days, otherwise it is useless. This means that you have to return to see the doctor at least twice more. This imposes a further burden on the health care system.
3. Statistics show that Taiwanese see their doctors more than any other country in the world. (Does this mean that Taiwanese are sicker than anyone else; overly worry about minor aches and pains; rely too much on doctors as “gods”; are more fearful of getting sick; are hypochondriacs; are more unaware of self-preventative medical treatment; are too dependent, or what?)

Without a doubt, it is certain that health education in self-preventative medical care is sorely needed here.

◆ **It is not necessary to get rid of all bacteria.** Not all bacteria are harmful. Healthy bodies carry millions of useful bacteria, mainly in our gut (large intestine) where they help digest food.

◆ **Antibiotics may be harmful.** Antibiotics are designed to harm bacteria and not us. Sometimes antibiotics kill useful bacteria and cause unwanted side effects such as diarrhea, stomach pains and thrush (a vaginal yeast infection). Nausea, vomiting and skin rashes may also occur due to antibiotics.

◆ **Bacteria may become “used to” antibiotics.** As part of the bacteria’s normal defense, they can become “used to” or resistant to particular antibiotics. This means that antibiotics may lose their effectiveness and not work very well. It is important not to overuse antibiotics, especially by using them **unnecessarily** for colds or the flu.



So what can you do for a cold?

There are no instant cures for viral colds, but the following suggestions will make you feel more comfortable.

- ◆ **Take Rest.** A warm comfortable environment will help your immune system fight off the viruses. Take a day or two off work if you need it.
- ◆ **Drink plenty of fluids** (e.g. Water, dilute fruit juice) to prevent the membranes in your nose and throat drying out and to replace fluids lost from your body.
- ◆ **Take regular paracetamol or aspirin-based products.** Take every 4 to 6 hours for up to 3 days to reduce fever and relieve aches and pains. Ask your doctor or pharmacist about the most appropriate medicine and dosage. (Don't give children aspirin-based products).
- ◆ **Use steam inhalations.** Breathing in steam during a hot shower can help you clear mucus from blocked sinuses, relieve nasal congestion and chest tightness. Alternatively, you can breathe in steam by placing your head over a bowl of hot (but not boiling) water, and using a towel over your head to trap the steam. (Stirring some Vicks Vapor Rub or Eucalyptus gel or oil in the water gives an astringent feeling, but do not use Tiger Balm, as the spicy capsaicin in this mixture will burn your nasal passages).
- ◆ **Use a decongestant.** These may help dry a runny nose or relieve blocked sinuses. Do not use for more than 5 days.
- ◆ **Use lozenges and gargles.** Throat lozenges or gargling warm salted water may help to relieve a sore throat.

Finally, another, very dangerous illness has similar symptoms to a cold and the flu. If you develop any of the following dangerous symptoms of meningitis such as:

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| ◆ Severe headaches or neck pain; | ◆ High fever; |
| ◆ Eyes intolerant to light; | ◆ Vomiting; or |
| ◆ Drowsiness, floppiness, less alertness or difficulty in waking; | ◆ Unusual high-pitched cry (for a child) |
| ◆ Skin rash; | |

-----You must contact a doctor immediately.

[These notes are summarized from the NZ Medical Association pamphlet given to patients to advise them on cold self-care].

