

HEALTH TOPICS A - Z

VIRAL UPPER RESPIRATORY INFECTIONS

Viral respiratory infections are the most common acute illnesses seen by health care providers in the United States. All age groups are affected. Viruses are spread by droplets (coughing, sneezing, nasal secretions and kissing). Viruses cause many different upper respiratory illnesses (URIs) including the common cold, sore throats (pharyngitis and tonsillitis), laryngitis, croup, influenza, mononucleosis, and many types of bronchitis and pneumonia.



Often it is difficult for a physician or nurse practitioner to distinguish between a viral and a bacterial illness (such as many cases of tonsillitis). At these times it may be necessary to perform cultures or blood tests. However, in most cases, viral illnesses are easily diagnosable by examination and additional tests are unnecessary.

Perhaps the most important point to make about viral illness is this:

ANTIBIOTICS DO NOT HELP VIRUSES AND OFTEN MAKE THE PATIENT WORSE!

So often, patients have been taught by their parents, friends and yes, even their doctors, that they need antibiotics to get better from every upper respiratory infection. This is just not true, and leads to unnecessary expense and potential side effects. In addition, overuse of antibiotics can lead to the creation of multiply resistant bacteria, a sort of “antibiotic Darwinism” where only the strong, resistant bacteria live to reproduce. You only need to read the newspaper about Methicillin-Resistant Staph aureus, or MRSA, to know where that can lead.

Viral illnesses are best treated symptomatically:

1. **REST:** Most American adults never give themselves a chance to get well when they have a virus. They continue to work, go to school, or both. They stay up late and get up early. Failure to rest properly and allow your body to fight off the virus will not only delay recovery; it can lead to worsening infection and even bacterial complications.
2. **INCREASE FLUIDS:** Fever, cough and nasal secretions all lead to fluid losses, and patients often get dehydrated with viral URIs. Dehydration prevents the body from mobilizing its response to infection. It is a good idea to double or even triple your fluid intake when you have a virus (unless you are on a fluid restriction by your doctor for heart disease).
3. **TAKE ACETAMINOPHEN (TYLENOL, OTHERS):** Viruses often cause fevers, headaches and muscle aches. These symptoms can be controlled by acetaminophen, aspirin or ibuprofen. However, aspirin should be avoided in those under 21 years of age with viral URIs due to the association with Reyes' Syndrome (an often fatal liver and brain inflammation illness).
4. **TREAT SYMPTOMS AS NECESSARY:** Decongestants, warm gargles, cough medications (both prescription and over-the-counter) and salt-water nose drops (Ocean, NaSal, others) are often helpful. Check with the doctor, nurse or pharmacist if you are unsure.

Most viral URIs get better in 7 to 10 days. If your symptoms persist longer than this, or if you develop new or worsening symptoms, see your healthcare provider for a re-check!

Michael J. Huey 7/92, revised Carolyn Krone, ARNP, California State University, Bakersfield SHS 2/06 and Michael J. Huey, MD 11/07
