



Questions & Answers/A Guide for Patients
Viral Upper Respiratory Infection (Cold)

What causes a runny nose during a cold?

When viruses that cause colds first infect the nose and sinuses, the nose produces clear mucus. This helps wash germs from the nose and sinuses. After two or three days, the body's immune cells fight back, changing the mucus to a white or yellow color. As the bacteria that live in the nose grow back, they may also be found in the mucus, changing the mucus to a greenish color. This is a normal part of your body's response to a cold, and does not mean that the infection is getting worse or that you need antibiotics.

How is a cold treated?

The best treatment is rest. Nasal discharge, cough, fever, headache and muscle ache is bothersome, but several studies have shown that antibiotics won't make these symptoms better faster.

Are antibiotics ever needed for a cold?

Only if your doctor diagnoses sinusitis, which usually only happens if you have a runny nose and cough for at least ten days.

Why not take antibiotics now?

They won't help you feel better, and unnecessary antibiotics may be harmful. Each time you take antibiotics, you are more likely to develop resistant germs. If you develop an infection due to a resistant bacteria, you may develop a more severe illness, require more expensive antibiotics, or even need to get antibiotics in the hospital. Since a runny nose will get better by itself, it is best to wait and take antibiotics only if they are needed.

What should I do?

There are several things you can do that will help you feel better:

- Avoid cigarette smoke
- Drink plenty of liquids
- Steam (from shower or bath) to loosen secretions
- Acetaminophen or ibuprofen as needed for fever or pain
- Adequate rest
- Decongestants for symptom relief

❖ This information has been obtained from the Oregon Department of Human Services/Office of Disease Prevention & Epidemiology.

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