

ASK YOUR DOCTOR

Do I need antibiotics? "For the common cold, the answer is 100% no, because it won't help," says Lisa Kalk, MD. But if you don't feel better after 10 days, check in with your doctor to rule out other conditions.

Are over-the-counter cold remedies safe to take? Yes, but if you have any chronic conditions, like diabetes, heart disease, or high blood pressure, be sure to check with your doctor first.

Can I try immune-boosting supplements? "It generally can't hurt to try one," says Kalk. Still, make sure that supplements won't interact with other drugs and supplements you take.

Should I be tested for allergies? If a cold seems to last forever—and your doctor has ruled out more serious problems—you may be dealing with allergies instead.

Search for the article "Immune-Boosting Treats" at WebMD.com.

Kick the Cold

How to avoid getting sick in the first place—and what to do if it happens anyway

BY BARBARA BRODY

You know the misery the common cold can bring. Most adults battle two to four colds every year, thanks to more than 200 viruses that can make you cough, sneeze, and feel like you can hardly breathe through your nose, thanks to congestion. But you're not powerless to reduce your risk or tame symptoms.

How not to get sick

Your friend might insist that loading up on vitamin C, eating garlic, or taking zinc supplements has made her cold-proof, but so far research does not show such strategies make a major difference.

What to do instead? "The most important thing you can do is to wash your hands often," says Lisa Kalk, MD, an internist at Medical Offices of Manhattan and clinical assistant professor, Department of Medicine, at NYU Langone Medical Center.

Throughout the day, you touch germ-covered doorknobs, subway handles, and other people's hands when you shake them. The only surefire way to get them off before they infect you is to use soap and water. The CDC advises scrubbing thoroughly for at least 20 seconds.

If you don't have a sink handy, an alcohol-based hand sanitizer should also do the trick, says Kalk. It tends to work well enough at killing the viruses that cause colds, so keeping a bottle in your purse is a smart move.

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL SMITH, MD, WEBMD CHIEF MEDICAL DIRECTOR



I'm sick—now what?

When you do come down with a cold, expect it to last seven to 10 days. If you're sick longer—or if you have a high fever, wheezing, or are coughing up blood—call your doctor.

You can't really cure a run-of-the-mill cold, though some evidence suggests that taking vitamin C, echinacea, and zinc supplements might shorten the duration by a day or two. That said, you can do plenty to feel better. The key is to match the complaint to the remedy. For example, if you have:

- A low-grade fever or feel achy, try over-the-counter pain relievers.
- A cough with chest congestion, try an expectorant, like guaifenesin, or a cough suppressant, such as dextromethorphan, which may help with the dry cough that often comes with a cold.
- A stuffy nose, try a decongestant like pseudoephedrine or phenylephrine.
- A lot of sneezing and a runny nose, try an antihistamine like chlorpheniramine. You may want to take these at night, since some can cause drowsiness.

And if you want some drug-free remedies, try honey to soothe a cough, a saline nasal rinse to clear out mucus, or a humidifier to add moisture to the air in your home. Be sure to stay hydrated with plenty of water.

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