

It's cold season again. The common cold is the most common infectious disease in the United States. It's responsible for more school absences than any other illness. Most teens get between two and four colds a year.

What Causes Colds?

Most colds are caused by viruses called **rhinoviruses** that are in invisible droplets in the air you breathe or on things you touch. More than 100 different rhinoviruses can get through the protective lining of the nose and throat. This triggers an immune system reaction that can make the throat sore, cause a headache, and make it hard to breathe.

No one knows exactly why people become infected with colds at certain times. But no matter what you hear, sitting or sleeping in a draft, not dressing warmly when it's chilly, or going outside with wet hair will not cause someone to catch a cold.

Catching Colds

Rhinoviruses can stay alive as droplets in the air or on surfaces for as long as 3 hours or even more. So if you touch your mouth or nose after touching someone or something that's been contaminated by one of these viruses, you'll probably catch a cold. If you already have a cold, you're more likely to spread it to others if you don't wash your hands after you cough or sneeze. Going to school or doing normal activities probably won't make you feel any worse. But it will increase the likelihood that your cold will spread to classmates or friends.

How Long Do Colds Last?

Cold symptoms usually appear 2 or 3 days after a person has been exposed to a source of infection. People with colds are most contagious for the first 3 or 4 days after the symptoms appear and may be contagious for up to 3 weeks. Although some colds can linger for as long as 2 weeks, most clear up within a week.

When Should I Go to the Doctor?

Teens who catch colds usually don't get very sick and don't need medical attention. However, talk to a doctor if any of these things happen to you:

- your cold symptoms last for more than a week or appear at the same time every year or whenever you're exposed to pollen, dust, animals, or some other substance (you could have an allergy)

- you have trouble breathing or wheeze when you catch a cold (you could have asthma)
- your symptoms get worse after 3 days or so instead of better (this might mean strep throat, sinusitis, bronchitis, or some other bacterial infection, especially if you smoke)

You should see your doctor if you think you might have more than a cold or if you're getting worse instead of getting better.

Other signs that it's time to call your doctor include:

- coughing that lasts for more than 2-3 weeks
- inability to keep food or liquids down
- increasing headache or facial or throat pain
- severely painful sore throat
- fever of 103° F (39.3° C) or higher, or a fever of 102° F (38.9° C) that lasts for more than a day
- chest or stomach pain
- swollen glands (lymph nodes)
- earache

A doctor won't be able to identify which specific virus is causing a cold. But if you have a cold, your doctor can examine your throat and ears and possibly also take a throat culture to make sure your symptoms aren't a sign of another condition. If your doctor does prescribe antibiotics, be careful to take the medication exactly as directed. If you stop taking it too soon — even if you start feeling better — the infection may not go away and you can develop other problems.

Can Colds Be Prevented?

Sooner or later everybody catches a cold. But you can strengthen your immune system's infection-fighting ability by exercising regularly, eating a balanced diet, and getting enough rest.

Virus particles can travel up to 12 feet through the air when someone who has a cold coughs or sneezes, so try to keep your distance from anyone with a cold. Stay clear of smokers, too: even secondhand smoke can make people more likely to get sick. Don't use the same towels or eating utensils as someone else; don't share lipstick or lip balm; and don't drink from anyone else's glass, can, or bottle — you never know who might be about to come down with a cold and is already spreading the virus.

~~~~~Adapted from [www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)~~~~~

