



University of North Carolina Wilmington
Abrons Student Health Center

INSTRUCTION SHEET: UPPER RESPIRATORY INFECTION (URI) = COLD

The Student Health Provider has diagnosed an upper respiratory infection (URI), also known as the common cold. URI's are very common: About a billion colds occur in the US each year.

URI's are caused by tiny germs called viruses. The infection affects the upper breathing passages: the nose, sinuses, throat, ears, trachea (windpipe), and larynx (voice box). People get fewer colds as they grow older, but young adults typically get two to four colds a year.

Fortunately, viral infections are generally less serious than bacterial infections. Unfortunately, viral infections like colds can make people feel miserable, and few medicines are effective against viruses (most antibiotics work against bacteria). The *symptoms* of a URI can be treated, but the infection itself must be overcome by the body's defense mechanisms.

Symptoms of an URI include stuffy or runny nose, scratchy throat, watery and itchy eyes, sneezing, dry cough, congestion, hoarseness, low fever, loss of appetite, mild headache, and fatigue (tired feeling). Nasal drainage ranges from clear & watery to thick & yellow or green.

Which cold symptoms a person has depends on which virus is causing the infection (more than a hundred viruses cause infections in humans). Body aches, high fever ($>103^{\circ}$), vomiting, and diarrhea are typical of the flu or other viral infections, not colds.

URI symptoms typically last one to two weeks.

Telling the difference between a viral and bacterial infection is not 100%. Also, a URI can be followed by a more serious bacterial infection.

At present, you appear to have a non-serious URI. **But, if your symptoms change or worsen, you should be checked again.**

MEASURES YOU SHOULD TAKE TO HELP TREAT YOUR URI:

1. Rest as much as possible. Get adequate sleep. Give your body time to recover.
2. Drink plenty of liquids. Any non-alcoholic drink is fine. Do not force solid food if your appetite is off.
3. Over-the-counter medicines can help treat specific symptoms. Acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen, or naproxen are effective for discomfort and fever. Decongestants (nasal spray or by mouth) can relieve excessive nasal drainage. Cough medicines containing dextromethorphan (DM) are helpful for cough.
4. Make a follow-up appointment as indicated. Your provider can help you control symptoms and monitor your progress. If you develop sharp ear pain, fever over 101.5° , or cough producing significant amounts of foul sputum, see a medical provider promptly.
5. If your symptoms or overall condition worsen significantly, seek medical care *at once*. Return to the Student Health Center or see another medical provider without delay if you develop significant chest pain or shortness of breath.