

Ahh-chooo

Coping with the coughing, aching, sniffing of a cold

COMMON COLD

The common cold, one of the most occurring illnesses in the world (almost 66 million cases each year in the United States alone), is caused by more than 200 known viruses. In the United States each year, adults get an average of 2 to 4 colds and children get an average of 6 to 8 colds. Although most cases are mild and usually last about a week, colds are the leading cause of doctor visits and lost days at work and school.

An article in this issue of *JAMA* (page 1962) found that one remedy that has become popular in treating cold symptoms in recent years—zinc lozenges—may not be effective in treating symptoms of a cold in children. Some of the first- to twelfth-graders involved in the study received 10-mg zinc lozenges 5 or 6 times a day for 3 weeks and some received

placebo lozenges containing no zinc. The study showed that it took children taking zinc lozenges an average of 9 days to get over all their cold symptoms, which was the same amount of time for children who took placebo lozenges. The study also found that children who took zinc lozenges had a higher rate of adverse effects: bad taste reactions; nausea; mouth, tongue, or throat irritation; and diarrhea.

The use of zinc to relieve cold symptoms has become a controversial issue, with previous studies in adults equally divided between those that showed zinc lozenges helped reduce the symptoms and duration of a cold by as much as 42% and those that showed no effect. The researchers emphasize the need for further research to define what role zinc plays in treating common cold symptoms and why its effects on children may be different than on adults.

Additional Sources: National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, American Academy of Otolaryngology—Head and Neck Surgery, Inc., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

TREATING A COLD:

Antibiotics are not effective for viruses and do not improve cold symptoms. The common cold is caused by viruses and should never be treated with antibiotics. Taking antibiotics unnecessarily can lead to **antibiotic resistance**, a potentially dangerous situation in which infection-causing bacteria become immune to the effects of certain antibiotics. This leaves fewer, and often more expensive, drug options for your doctor to prescribe when serious bacterial infections strike in the future. A cold can only be treated for its symptoms: getting plenty of bed rest and drinking lots of fluids; gargling with warm salt water; using ointment for a raw nose; or taking aspirin or acetaminophen to relieve headache or fever.

SYMPTOMS OF A COLD:

Cold symptoms usually appear 2 to 3 days after a cold virus enters your body. Common symptoms include sore or scratchy throat, runny or stuffy nose, cough, sneezing, and an all-over achiness.

COULD IT BE MORE THAN JUST A COLD?

When other symptoms occur or the symptoms last longer than a few weeks, it may be a sign of a more serious condition. For example, flu (**influenza**) is usually signaled by severe headache, chills, and fever. If your cold-like symptoms last more than 2 weeks, they may be caused by an infection of the sinus cavities (**bacterial sinusitis**), which requires a physician's diagnosis and possibly antibiotic treatment.

VIRUS VS. BACTERIA:

Infections caused by viruses and infections caused by bacteria attack the body in different ways. For the most part, viral infections eventually stop on their own (**self-limiting**) and don't require prescription medication. Bacterial infections may need to be treated with antibiotics in order to stop the spread of the infection.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases
Building 31, Room 7A50
31 Center Drive, MSC 2520
Bethesda, MD 20892-2520 or www.niaid.nih.gov
- American Academy of Otolaryngology—Head and Neck Surgery, Inc.
Is It More Than Just a Cold?
703/836-4444 or www.entnet.org

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm.

COLD PREVENTION:

- Wash your hands frequently
- Avoid close exposure to people with colds
- Do not touch your nose or eyes after coming in contact with a person with a cold
- If you have a cold, always use a facial tissue when sneezing or coughing

COPY FOR YOUR PATIENTS!

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