

Ivy Grove Surgery

Minor Illness Leaflet #5 – Coughs and Colds

Dear

We have provided this leaflet following your recent consultation on . The NHS aims to empower all patients to self-care and we hope that this leaflet will help you to manage your condition in the future.

Name of condition

Coughs and colds.

What it is

From time to time we all suffer from coughs and colds. As we all know from personal experience colds and coughs are extremely common especially in the winter months. It can be difficult to know the difference between an infection on your chest and one that only affects the upper airways. This leaflet explains when you should worry about a chest infection or pneumonia and when you should be reassured that you are suffering from a cold. It gives advice on self-care treatments that can be used to alleviate your symptoms whilst your body fights the cold and recovers in its own time.

What causes colds and coughs

Colds and coughs are caused by viruses. Viruses adapt all of the time to fool our body's immune system. That is why we all tend to suffer from colds more than once. Children are more at risk from catching colds due to their under developed immune system that has not been exposed to the range of colds viruses adults have. As we grow so does our immune system it keeps a memory of cold viruses it has met before and neutralises them before we even have any symptoms. Elderly people are also more at risk of catching colds/flu as their immune system is not quite as effective as it was when they were younger. Unfortunately viruses cannot be cured with antibiotics.

Symptoms to expect

Flu

Tends to come on quickly
Headache
High temperature (fever) more than 38°C
Aching muscles and bones
Unable to continue normal daily activities

Colds

More gradual in onset
Blocked/runny nose or a sore throat
Slight rise in your temperature
Cough normally develops after and can last for several weeks
Able to carry on their daily activities

Self-care

- Most people who experience cold symptoms do not need to see their GP
- Regular paracetamol and ibuprofen
- Try steaming using Olbas oil or Vicks mixed in hot water and inhaling the vapour (avoid burning not using boiling water and always keep medications out of the reach of children)
- Speak to your pharmacist who will be able to give advice on treatment available
- It is important to note that there is not a medication to 'cure' a cold only to help lessen the symptoms

When to seek further help

- If you are in an at-risk group (see 'At-risk groups' below)
- Symptoms persist or are not improving for more than 3 weeks

Get the right help for your condition, visit our online help page at <http://ivy.gs/help>

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- Symptoms suddenly get worse
- Breathing difficulties at rest or cannot speak full sentences (it is normal to feel a little out of breath on climbing the stairs when you have a cold)
- Coughing up blood
- Crushing chest pain – ring 999 (it is normal to feel tenderness in the chest from coughing)

Preventing coughs and colds

There are more than 200 cold viruses and three types of flu with many strains. Therefore these viruses are hard to avoid. It is a fact of life that we will all catch these viruses no matter how hard we try to avoid them. Cold and flu viruses are spread through very tiny droplets when an infected person coughs and sneezes. The person suffering from the cold may also spread the virus by touching surfaces such as door handles if there are droplets on their fingers.

To try and prevent transmission of the virus use tissues to catch, kill and bin the virus. Wash hand your hands after using the tissues. With even the best of intentions the person with the cold virus may still pass it on to others.

At-risk groups

- People with known chest problems such as asthma, COPD or heart disease
- The very young or very old

Antibiotics and viruses

Antibiotics are effective against bacteria. Bacteria are living single cells, some cause disease and others are useful. Antibiotics are NOT effective against viruses, such as ones that cause colds or flu. Viruses are much smaller and do not have many of the working parts that antibiotics attack in bacteria, such as a cell wall. Viruses cannot reproduce without a living organism such as us. Viruses use our cells as machines to reproduce exact multiple copies millions of times over during a cold or flu infection.

The spread of viruses can be managed by vaccination. Unfortunately the cold virus in particular is very effective at altering its make-up. It has been found that viruses actually swap their genetic information to ensure that they can keep one step ahead of our immune systems. You may have heard of antiviral medications, unfortunately these are not very effective and only lessen the severity or time course of the viral infection by a few days.

So if antibiotics don't work and antivirals are not very effective what should we do? Our body's immune system is very effective at eventually killing the virus but it does take time. The body's immune system has to recognise there is an infection that it's not come across before, make white cells to fight the infection and then send out the white cells to destroy the virus. The immune system then 'remembers' this particular virus, if it ever comes visiting again it is dealt with quickly and we do not even notice. That is why viruses are constantly changing their survival depends on it!

Problems with antibiotics

Antibiotics may cause side effects such as nausea, vomiting or diarrhoea. Some people have an allergic reaction to antibiotics such as a rash or at the extreme severe breathing difficulties. Antibiotic resistance is a growing problem. This means that the antibiotics we rely on to treat infection have stopped working. We already see urinary tract infections, gonorrhoea, MRSA infections, and chest infections that are resistant to some antibiotics. If we continue to use antibiotics inappropriately then these and other infection may become untreatable, taking us back to a time when people died of common infections.