Winter Coughs and Colds

During the winter months there are so many viruses about that it is almost impossible to avoid catching one.

The common cold

The common cold spreads through contact with the virus, either direct or indirect. Direct contact happens when we breathe in small droplets from other people’s coughs or sneezes. This is very hard to avoid. Indirect contact is easier to avoid. This happens when we pick up a virus on our hands by touching an object that has been used by someone with a cold; for example a door handle. Regularly washing your hands or using alcohol based cleansing gels can help minimise the risk of indirect contact. If someone in your household has a cold, cleaning work surfaces more often, using separate towels and cups etc. can help to reduce the risk of indirect contact with the virus.

Do I have a cold or the flu?

The flu usually comes on more rapidly than a cold is much more severe. People with flu have a temperature of between 38-40 degrees that starts suddenly. They feel feverish, have aching muscles and suffer from exhaustion. Some people also feel nausea. Symptoms come on within about three days and can last for up to a week. Exhaustion may take a little longer to get over. A cold is mild infection with symptoms that can include a sore throat, blocked or runny nose, and a cough. The temperature may be slightly raised but exhaustion is not a symptom of the common cold. Colds clear up on their own after about a week, although the cough may remain a little longer.

Over the counter (OTC) medications for colds

There is no cure for a cold but there are treatments that can help with the symptoms. These are simple analgesics such as paracetamol, aspirin or ibuprofen. These all help to reduce aches, pains and temperature. If you have a blocked nose products that contain a decongestant can help and those that have an antihistamine in them may make is easier to get to sleep at night. You should tell the pharmacist if you are taking any other medication before you select which OTC cold remedies to buy so they can advise you about what is suitable. Also remember most OTC medicines for coughs and colds are NOT suitable for young children so check with the pharmacist what you should give to a child.

Should I send my child to school if they have a cold?

It is fine for a child to go to school with a minor cough or cold but if they have symptoms that include raised temperature, shivers, severe coughing or drowsiness don’t send them to school and speak to a GP. Once the child starts to feel better they can return to school 24 hours later.
My cold is better but how do I shake off the cough?

Sometimes we seem to be getting over our cold but the cough seems to linger on. The reason is that the immune system, which is fighting off the virus, raises the body temperature to dilate the blood vessels in order to allow immune cells to travel quickly to the affected areas. This causes swelling which, as well as blocking the nose, congests the lungs causing us to cough. The cold virus also attacks and damages the protective cells inside the nose. Although we may be feeling better, dead cells start to collect in the nose and lungs getting trapped by mucus which is in the lungs and this also causes us to cough. Isotonic and decongestant nasal sprays reduce mucus that can cause tickly coughs. Using a defensive nasal spray that lowers the pH of the nose may also reduce secretions to help prevent a cough from developing.

Coughs and how long they last

There are two different types of cough associated with the cold; dry and chesty. A dry cough is set off by a tickly sensation in the back of the throat due to the upper airways and the throat being inflamed. The throat is then irritated by the coughing and it makes you want to cough more. A dry cough doesn't produce phlegm. A chesty cough produces phlegm. A chesty cough can be productive i.e. the phlegm comes up, or unproductive if the phlegm doesn't come up. Chesty coughs can be painful with pressure and congestion in the chest as well as mucus in the airways. Coughs connected with colds and flu normally clear up within three weeks.

What can I take for a cough?

As with colds there is no cure as such for a cough, however, there are cough mixtures that can help calm the cough reflex and reduce phlegm which help to decrease coughing. The most effective cough remedies contain dextromethorphan, menthol or guaifenesin. Ask the pharmacist for advice.

Should I see a GP for a cough or cold?

There are numerous treatments for coughs and colds that are available from the pharmacy which will help relieve symptoms until you are better. If the pharmacist thinks you should see a doctor after you have spoken with them they will let you know. Generally you only need to see a GP if any of the following apply:
• You have a temperature of 39 degrees or more.
• You feel confused or disorientated
• If you have sharp pain in your chest
• If you have coughed up blood in your phlegm
• If you are finding it difficult to breathe
• If you have had symptoms of a cough / cold that have gone on for longer than a few weeks

Remember, no amount of antibiotics will cure a cough or cold.

http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/coldsandflu/Pages/Coldcomfort.aspx