

Acute Viral Upper Respiratory Infection (URI)- Factsheet

What is acute URI?

Acute viral upper respiratory tract infection (URI) is also called the common cold. The upper-respiratory tract is the pathway that carries air to the lungs and includes the nose, throat, pharynx (tube that is part of throat ending at your “windpipe”), larynx (the “voice box”), and bronchi (the main passageway into the lungs). The common cold is caused by many types of different viruses. There are URIs caused by bacteria that are not discussed here.

What are the symptoms of acute URI?

Symptoms of the common cold typically include stuffy and runny nose, scratchy or sore throat, watery eyes, sneezing, mild cough, achy muscles and bones, headaches, low-grade fever, watery discharge from the nose that thickens and turns yellow or green, mild tiredness. In babies you may see trouble sleeping, fussiness, congestion in the nose, sometimes vomiting and diarrhea, and fever.

How is acute URI spread?

URIs spread from person to person through aerosol droplets and through direct hand-to-hand contact. You are at higher risk for acute URI in the following circumstances: when someone sick coughs or sneezes without covering their nose and mouth and droplets that have viruses in them are sprayed into the air; if you have a weakened immune system; when humidity is low (such as during the fall and winter when people are more likely to be inside); when you touch your nose or eyes; when you are in closed-in areas or crowded conditions such as in hospitals and schools.

How long are people contagious?

Acute viral URI last on average 7 to 11 days but symptoms may linger up to 21 days. However, the most contagious period is during the first 2 or 3 days that a person has symptoms, and rarely after 1 week.

Who gets acute URI?

Anyone can get URI. Children younger than 6 years of age are at greatest risk of getting colds. Most children will have at least 6 to 8 colds each year. Adults get colds about 2 to 4 times a year.

What treatment is available for people with acute URI?

For healthy people, the common cold is usually not serious and does not need special treatment. Even if you have green nasal secretions, you do not need an antibiotic. Children should get plenty of rest and drink lots of fluids. You can buy saline nasal sprays or drops over the counter without a prescription, and you can suction the mucus from your child’s nose with a rubber suction bulb. A cool mist humidifier in the room can help relieve congestion in infants and young children. Don’t share drinking glasses and utensils with someone who is sick. Remember to stay away from smoke which can make the irritation in the nose and throat worse. You should never give aspirin to a child who has fever.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work or daycare?

Children should stay home from school or childcare facilities until the fever is gone and they feel well enough to attend.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting acute URI?

The best protection against URIs is to practice frequent hand washing with soap and water. Teach your children to wash their hands before eating, after using the bathroom, after playing with animals, and after coughing or sneezing, and remind them not to touch their eyes nose, and mouth. Avoid being in close contact with sick people. Cover your mouth and nose if you are sick by sneezing and coughing into tissues and discarding them right away, then washing your hands well, or coughing and sneezing into your upper sleeve if no tissues are available. Wearing a mask if you are sick or near sick people can also reduce spread. Wipe down objects such as doorknobs, phones, remote controls and other things and surfaces that a person with URI may have used.