

Self-Care for Upper Respiratory Infections

Upper respiratory infections (URIs) are illnesses that primarily affect the nose, ears, throat, and upper airway. Common URIs include colds, influenza (flu), COVID-19, strep throat, tonsillitis, sinusitis, and bronchitis.

Symptoms of URIs can last up to **7-14 days** and most adults have **2-6 cases of URI each year**. Most URIs are caused by viruses and will resolve on their own without needing to see a health care provider; taking over-the-counter medications can help with symptoms while your immune system fights the virus. Antibiotics will **NOT** work against viruses or make you feel better any faster.

Symptoms of URIs include sore throat, sinus congestion, runny nose, postnasal drip (mucus draining from your sinuses down your throat), and cough. The cough is typically worse when lying down or first thing in the morning and is usually productive of clear to yellow or green mucus. Sinus pressure can develop due to inflammation and congestion, which may also cause headache. Sometimes a feeling of pressure or a popping sound can be heard in the ears, which is caused by fluid behind the eardrum. You also may have fatigue, muscle aches, and nausea/vomiting.

It can be hard to know what illness is causing your symptoms. Here is a chart from the [NIH](#) that may help:

Comparing Cold, Flu, Allergies, and COVID-19				
Symptoms	Cold	Flu	Airborne Allergy	COVID-19
Fever	Rare	Usual, high (100–102 °F), sometimes higher, especially in young children); lasts 3–4 days	Never	Common
Headache	Uncommon	Common	Uncommon	Common
General Aches, Pains	Slight	Usual; often severe	Never	Common
Fatigue, Weakness	Sometimes	Usual, can last up to 3 weeks	Sometimes	Common
Extreme Exhaustion	Never	Usual, at the beginning of the illness	Never	Common
Stuffy, Runny Nose	Common	Sometimes	Common	Common
Sneezing	Usual	Sometimes	Usual	Rarely
Sore Throat	Common	Sometimes	Sometimes	Common
Cough	Common	Common, can become severe	Sometimes	Common, dry cough
Chest Discomfort	Mild to moderate	Common	Rare, except for those with allergic asthma	Common; can cause trouble breathing or persistent pain or pressure in the chest that calls for immediate emergency care
Loss of Taste or Smell	Rarely	Rarely	Rarely	Common



So what should you do to feel better?

Help yourself by taking OTC meds that treat the symptoms you have. Follow the directions on OTC packages and do not use them more often than recommended. The following is a list of medicines that will help relieve your symptoms (all are available at the SHS Pharmacy):

Runny nose, postnasal drip, ear popping, watery eyes? Try an antihistamine.	Allegra (fexofenadine), Claritin (loratadine), Benadryl (diphenhydramine), Zyrtec (cetirizine)
Stuffy nose, sinus pressure, ear pressure? Try a decongestant or nasal spray.	Sudafed (pseudoephedrine), saline nasal spray, Flonase nasal spray
Feel like you are runny and stuffy at the same time? Try a combination antihistamine/decongestant.	Allegra-D, Claritin-D, or Zyrtec-D
Coughing? Try a suppressant/expectorant.	Robitussin DM, Mucinex-DM guaifenesin/detromethorphan)
Fever, body aches, sore throat, sinus pressure? Try a fever reducer/pain reliever.	Ibuprofen (Motrin, Aleve, Advil) or Acetaminophen (Tylenol) <i>NEVER take aspirin if you have a fever.</i>

Other things to do to help:

- ✓ **Drink lots of fluids** to stay hydrated – water, Gatorade, Sprite, or Ginger Ale, clear soups
- ✓ **Avoid alcohol and caffeine** drinks as they may worsen dehydration
- ✓ **Gargle frequently** with warm salt water to soothe sore throat, drink warm tea or use lozenges
- ✓ **Stop smoking or vaping** and avoid being around second-hand smoke
- ✓ **Rest** as your schedule allows

When do you need to contact a health care provider?

Call us at (252) 328-6841 during business hours to speak with a SHS nurse, pharmacy, or to schedule an appointment. If you need us after hours, our phone line connects to a free, 24 hour nurse advice line.

- No improvement after 7-10 days
- Fever that does not reduce with medication
- Chest pain
- Rash
- Inability to touch your chin to your chest
- If you are pregnant, immune compromised, or have an underlying chronic condition such as asthma, diabetes, or heart problems
- Symptoms that severely worsen
- Shortness of breath or wheezing
- White patches on back of throat, difficulty swallowing, or drooling
- Severe ear or throat pain
- If you have questions about how to treat your symptoms or you need more information