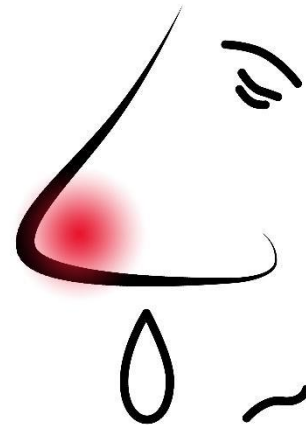


# The Common Cold

## Honey to Ma Huang

by Madeleine Beckman

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The cold, also known as the “acute upper respiratory tract infection,” commonly occurs among adults and, in particular, young children. This viral infection, often caused by rhinoviruses, is related to sore throat, congested nasal passages, low-grade fever, and fatigue that can last up to 3 weeks; the flu on the other hand, caused by the influenza virus, usually manifests similar, but with more severe symptoms, muscle aches and higher fever. Infected patients with the common cold want medicine from their doctors, even though the American Academy of Family Physicians recommends that health professionals limit prescription of antibiotics and cautions patients not to overuse expensive, often ineffective over-the-counter (OTC) medications.

### How to feel better?

Scientifically proven treatments may help relieve symptoms of colds in adults. These include nasal decongestants, zinc lozenges, OTC analgesics, asthma-relief inhalers and nebulizers, intranasal ipratropium (Atrovent), and nasal saline solution that may help clear nasal passages. Use of oral nasal decongestants (eg, pseudoephedrine, phenylephrine) may not be a safe option for patients > 50 years of age or persons with cardiovascular disease. The side effects of decongestant use may be worsened by caffeine consumption.

Use of probiotics may help prevent colds, but encouraging results found in clinical studies have not been significant. Antihistamines used alone show no benefit in shortening the duration or weakening the severity of upper respiratory infections. Use of zinc lozenges shortens the duration of cold symptoms, although it may not affect symptom severity.

In children, acetylcysteine prescribed to treat a self-limiting illness such as an upper respiratory infection may help reduce cough and is safe for use in children  $\geq 2$  years of age. Honey consumption (for children  $\geq 2$  years of age) and use of intranasal ipratropium (for children  $\geq 5$  years of age) and saline spray/irrigation (for small children  $\geq 1$  year of age) all may significantly reduce symptoms in young patients. Nonprescription cold medications should not be used in children  $\leq 4$  years of age. Further, use of OTC antitussives and antihistamines plus decongestants do not significantly relieve cough symptoms.

For both children and adults, use of echinacea, intranasal steroids, and steam treatments have not significantly helped to reduce the duration or severity of cold symptoms.

### **How to avoid catching a cold?**

According to Rong-Bao Lu, MD, a general practitioner and acupuncturist in New York City, “Acupuncture can be used as a preventive to boost the immune system to help prevent colds or to help cure a cold.” According to a recent report in *Medicine*, “...traditional Chinese acupuncture was shown to be effective and safe with strong operability, low cost, and environmentally friendly, especially suitable for children with fever...” Although fever may indicate other pathology or more significant disease.

Exercise is another scientifically proven method to help avoid these viral infections. David C. Nieman, DrPH, Director of the Appalachian State University Human

Performance Laboratory at the North Carolina Research Campus, led a study indicating that moderate exercise (30 minutes/day on most days) lowers the risk for acquiring a respiratory tract infection by 50%. Stress management, regular sleep patterns, healthy eating, high intake of fruit, and proper hygiene (including frequent hand-washing) are all lifestyle factors that influence the risk of contracting the common cold.

### **Do home remedies help?**

Some home remedies and cures have been passed down over generations. As the saying goes: *Choose your medicine.*

**Hot cocoa.** Research from the United Kingdom has shown that cocoa (which contains theobromine) helps suppress a cough. Theobromine acts on the vagus nerve, which spurs coughing. Cocoa also offers antioxidant benefit. Further, warmed milk used to make the hot cocoa can induce sleep.

**Mustard.** This herb has been used as a cure for the common cold since ancient Roman times. Many people still spread a mustard paste between two pieces of cloth and lay it on their chests to ward off the flu.

**Chicken soup.** As far back as 60 AD, the Roman surgeon Pedacius Dioscorides praised chicken soup as a cure for the common cold. Researchers have since learned that the amino acid cysteine found in chicken acts as a decongestant.

**Ma huang.** For 3,000 years, the Chinese have been drinking ma-huang tea, which is said to clear even the most congested nasal passages and throats. The traditional ma-huang plant contains pseudoephedrine, a common modern decongestant.

**Onions and garlic.** The jury's still out, but some research indicates that the antimicrobial and antiviral properties of these bulbs may help prevent a cold and speed recovery if symptoms develop. Onion and garlic may be chopped or minced and then

eaten 15 minutes later to give the enzymes in garlic time to react and increase its healthy effects.

### **What is the bottom line?**

Unfortunately, there is no vaccine to ward off the common cold. Until such a biologic is tested and marketed, avoiding contact with people who already are infected with cold viruses, frequent hand-washing, and not touching the eyes, lips, and nose with unwashed hands are good initial steps to avoiding the discomfort and annoyance of the common cold.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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