Care for Respiratory Illness

What is respiratory illness?

- Respiratory illness symptoms include sore throat, runny nose, congestion, cough, and fatigue with or without a fever, usually caused by a virus. Some respiratory illnesses are called “colds.”
- There are over 200 different viruses that cause respiratory illness. Because of this, the severity of symptoms can range from mildly annoying to severe enough that you don’t feel like doing anything.

How do I get it?

- Respiratory illness viruses spread mainly by droplets made when sick people cough and sneeze. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby.
- Sometimes, it can also be transmitted by touching surfaces (doorknobs, faucets) that an infected person has touched and then touching your nose, mouth or eyes.

How can I prevent it?

- Wash your hands, OFTEN, and/or use hand sanitizer.
- Don’t share utensils, lip balm, kisses or other personal items with others, especially people who are sick.

Should I be seen at the Student Health Center?

- Probably not. Most colds are viral, which means they aren’t affected by antibiotics.
- Most symptoms resolve in a week to 10 days without any medical intervention. A cough from viral bronchitis can last up to 21 days, but if it slowly improves and isn’t getting worse, you still probably won’t need an appointment. You can treat your symptoms at home with easy self care and over the counter medications.
- If you experiencing anything on the “When should I seek further care?” list below, call Student Health at 802-656-3350.

Self Care for Nasal, Sinus and Chest Symptoms

**Humidified air:**

- Vaporizer or humidifier (warm or cool mist)
- Shower steam: 2-3x/day in bathroom, door closed, shower at full heat. You need not be in the shower.

**Mechanically flush your nasal passages:**

- Saline nose spray: Spray 3-5 squirts into one side then snort to suck the congestion back toward your throat, spit it out if possible, repeat on other side.
- Make your own saline solution: ½ tsp of salt, ½ tsp baking soda, ½ tsp of sugar dissolved into ½ cup of water (can be used as gargle, too).
- Neti pot: Check out YouTube videos.

**Nasal decongestant spray:**

- Oxymetazoline (Afrin) 1-2 squirts each side of nose 2x/day. Do not do this for more than 7 consecutive days as it can start causing more congestion after that.

**Oral decongestant medications:**

- Phenylephrine (Sudafed PE) Ingredient in most over-the-counter decongestant &/or combo pills.
- Pseudoephedrine (Sudafed) Available without a prescription but is kept behind the counter (must show ID). It may be more effective but also causes side effects (fast heart, sleep trouble).

Follow package dosing directions for all over-the-counter medications.

When using combination cold remedies (like Nyquil, Robitussin or Mucinex D) be sure to check the ingredients so that you are not duplicating medications or taking too high a dose.

**Cough medications:**

- Guaifenesin (Some kinds of Robitussin, Mucinex) Expectorant which helps liquefy and loosen mucous to make it flow better if you have chest congestion.
- Dextromethorphan (Some kinds of Robitussin, Delsym) Suppressant which helps stop irritating, non-productive coughs and may help you sleep.

**Sore throat:**

- Saltwater gargle (with the saline recipe above) can be done as often as you like with warm water to relieve pain.
- Benzocaine cough drops (Cepacol) contain a numbing medication that can also help soothe.

**Pain medications for head and body aches:**

- Acetaminophen (Tylenol)
- Ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin)
- Naproxen (Aleve, Naprosyn)
  - Do NOT take aspirin; there is a risk of Reye Syndrome (a liver problem) if aspirin is taken during viral illness

**Hydration and nutrition:**

- Drink lots of water and fruit juices to help keep you hydrated and thin out mucus.
- Eat nutrient-rich foods, fruits and vegetables - you might not feel like eating much, so choose things with a high protein and vitamin content.

**When should I seek further care?**

- A high or prolonged fever for more than 5 days
- Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
- Pain or pressure in your chest
- An episode of fainting or near fainting
- Sinus pain lasting 10 days or more
- A cough that worsens or doesn’t improve over 2 weeks