



## Managing mild symptoms of the common cold, influenza, and COVID-19

**Sumari Davis**  
Amazeza Information Services, South Africa

### Introduction

Whether your patient has a common cold, the flu or COVID-19, the symptoms are often overlapping and similar. Although there is no cure for these self-limiting influenza-like diseases, treatment may be offered to alleviate symptoms and ease discomfort.

### Symptoms

The following symptoms are often seen in patients with the common cold:

- A sore or scratchy throat
- Cough
- Sneezing
- Blocked or stuffy nose
- Runny nose
- Headache
- Muscle aches
- Shivering or chills
- Watery eyes
- Low appetite
- Fatigue
- Earache
- Low-grade fever

Patients with seasonal influenza can also experience these symptoms, but they appear abruptly, and patients are usually more ill with substantial muscle and body aches, fever, nausea, chills, and extreme weakness.

Patients with COVID-19 may present with a high temperature, a new continuous cough, diarrhoea and a change or loss of taste or smell, in addition to the symptoms mentioned above.

Patients should be referred for immediate medical care if they experience any of the following symptoms:

- Shortness of breath
- Confusion
- Inability to stay awake
- Bluish lips or face

If patients experience any unusual or severe symptoms or if symptoms last longer than 10 days, they should also be referred to a doctor. Children younger than 3 months who are very sleepy or have a fever require referral to a doctor.

### Managing symptoms at home

Patients can alleviate some of the above symptoms by ensuring sufficient rest and taking in plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration and keep mucus thin. Consuming warm liquids may promote nasal drainage and make breathing easier. Tea with lemon and honey or other hot drinks may also help relieve congestion and ease a sore throat, and although there is no scientific evidence to support this, it is not harmful. Gargling with water or salt water may also be helpful to relieve a sore throat. Patients should avoid taking alcohol and caffeine as these can contribute to dehydration.

Treatment will depend on what symptoms the patient is experiencing. Table I provides some medicines that can be provided over-the-counter (OTC) to relieve symptoms. It is important to always provide dosing instructions from the package insert provided by the relevant manufacturer.

**Table 1:** Some OTC Treatment options available to alleviate flu-like symptoms

Symptom	Treatment options	Examples
Runny nose and sneezing	First-generation antihistamine tablets or syrups such as diphenhydramine, brompheniramine, chlorpheniramine or promethazine may be useful but can cause drowsiness. This may be helpful for patients who cannot sleep.	Allergex® Phenergan® Rhineton®
	Nasal sprays containing cromoglicic acid or antihistamines	Rhinolast® Sinumax® Vividrin®
Blocked or stuffy nose	Decongestants such as pseudoephedrine, phenylpropanolamine or phenylephrine may be offered but should not be used in patients with uncontrolled high blood pressure or in pregnancy. They are often combined with analgesics to relieve pain.	Nurofen® cold and flu Sinugesic®
	Normal saline nasal sprays can reduce runny nose and congestion. It can also be used to clean nasal passages before medicated products are applied. This may enhance the efficacy of intranasal medicated products.	Otrivin Sea Water® Sterimar®
	Nasal sprays containing oxymetazoline or xylometazoline may be used (maximum 2–3 consecutive days to prevent the risk of rebound congestion).	Dristan® Illiadin® Otrivin® Sinutab®
	Tablets containing decongestants are often available in combination with antihistamines*	Actifed® Coryx® Demazin® Dimetapp® Flusin®/Flusin S® Rinex® Sudafed®
Thick mucus	Carbocysteine, n-acetylcysteine, and bromhexine break down thick mucus. These make it easier to remove mucus from the airways.	Bisolvon® Bronkese® Flemex® Mucospect® Solmucol®
Sore throat and headache	Paracetamol, ibuprofen, or naproxen	Advil® Naprosyn® Nurofen® Panado®
Cough	Dextromethorphan and codeine can suppress cough but should only be used when a patient has a dry cough that keeps them awake.	Benylin® Dry Cough Dilinct® Dry Cough Pholtex® Forte
	Guaifenesin increases the production of a watery mucus and may be helpful in getting rid of mucus in patients with a wet cough. They should preferably not be used at the same time as antihistamines which work by drying up the mucus.	Benylin® Wet Cough Dilinct®

\* Products may also include other ingredients such as analgesics and/or vitamin C

Cold and flu medications frequently contain combinations of active ingredients. Therefore, it is important to ensure that patients do not overdose by using more than one product that may contain the same or similar active ingredients. Always check with the patient to see what other medication they are using before recommending further treatment.

## Prevention

To prevent the spread of viruses that cause respiratory diseases such as the common cold, flu, or COVID-19, it is wise to avoid large crowds of people, especially when in enclosed areas. Frequent hand washing or sanitising, and wearing masks also help reduce the spread of these diseases. Patients who are already sick should stay at home and be sure to cough or sneeze into a tissue or into a sleeve or the elbow and not into their hands.

Although there are no vaccines to prevent the common cold, vaccines are available to prevent seasonal influenza and COVID-19.

The seasonal flu vaccine contains four strains and may not always prevent the flu but can reduce the need to see a doctor with flu symptoms by up to 60%. In addition, vaccination further prevents

the spread of influenza to others, thus providing indirect protection for those who are not vaccinated.

The flu vaccine is recommended for all patients older than 6 months but especially for patients who are at high risk of getting severe disease or complications from the flu. That includes the following groups of people:

- Pregnant women
- Patients with chronic lung conditions (e.g. asthma, tuberculosis)
- Patients with chronic heart or kidney disease
- Patients with diabetes
- Patients with immunocompromising conditions such as HIV or those on cancer treatment
- Obese patients
- Children between 6 months and 18 years of age taking chronic aspirin treatment (they are at increased risk of Reye's syndrome if they get a viral infection)
- Patients older than 65 years
- People staying in nursing homes, chronic care centres or rehabilitation centres

- Family contacts of high-risk patients
- Healthcare workers

Because the protection after a flu vaccine reduces over time and because the type of flu viruses circulating every year may differ, it is recommended to have the current flu vaccine every year. The flu vaccine takes up to two weeks before it becomes effective and should therefore be given at the beginning of the flu season as soon as the vaccine becomes available, to provide protection as soon as possible.

Although children younger than nine years of age need a second flu vaccine at least four weeks after their first-ever flu vaccine, previously vaccinated patients, and those nine years and older, need only one vaccine per season, and there is no benefit in giving another vaccine to these patients later in the same year.

COVID-19 vaccines are available, and vaccination was rolled out to include patients 12 years and older in October 2021 in South Africa. At the time of publication, booster doses are administered 3 months after completion of primary vaccination.

## Conclusion

There is no cure for influenza-like illnesses, but patients with mild to moderate symptoms of the common cold, seasonal influenza, or COVID-19 can be treated at home. Management will depend on the symptoms and dosing of medications should always be according to the recommendations of the manufacturer based on the age of

the patient, as well as the presence of other concurrent illnesses. It is important to refer patients if they have severe symptoms or if recommended treatment does not improve symptoms within a few days. Prevention is always better than cure and in addition to washing hands regularly, wearing masks and maintaining physical distance, vaccines are available to prevent seasonal influenza and COVID-19.

## Bibliography

- Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. Similarities and differences between flu and COVID-19. Updated 18 Jan 2022. Available from: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/symptoms/flu-vs-covid19.htm>. Accessed 3 Feb 2022.
- Cleveland Clinic. The common cold and the flu. Updated 27 Jan 2022. Available from: <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/13756--colds-and-flu-symptoms-treatment-prevention-when-to-call>. Accessed 3 Feb 2022.
- Doerr S. Common cold. MedicineNet. Updated 19 Feb 2021. Available from: [https://www.medicinenet.com/common\\_cold/article.htm](https://www.medicinenet.com/common_cold/article.htm). Accessed 3 Feb 2022.
- Holland K. Everything you need to know about the common cold. Healthline. Updated 23 Dec 2021. Available from: <https://www.healthline.com/health/cold-flu/cold#:~:text=The%20common%20cold%20is%20easily,coughing%2C%20sometimes%20accompanied%20by%20fatigue>. Accessed 3 Feb 2022.
- Monthly index of Medical Specialities (MIMS). 2021;61(11).
- Paddock M. All about the common cold. Medical News Today. Updated 8 Dec 2021. Available from: <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/166606>. Accessed 3 Feb 2022.
- Sexton DJ, McClain MT. The common cold in adults: Treatment and prevention. In UpToDate. Updated 24 May 2021. Available from: <https://www.uptodate.com/contents/the-common-cold-in-adults-treatment-and-prevention>. Accessed 3 Feb 2022.
- South African Medicines Formulary, 13th ed. Cape Town; South African Medical Association; 2020.