

# Coughs and sneezes spread diseases...

Lee Kayne offers advice on complementary therapies for winter ailments

Photo courtesy of Kimberly-Clark



**T**he common cold is caused by a viral infection of the upper respiratory tract. Symptoms typically appear one to two days after infection and last around a week, varying in type and severity but generally including sneezing, sore throat, runny or blocked nose, cough, headache and sometimes, especially in children, fever. The symptoms will generally resolve themselves and it is usually possible to continue with one's daily business, especially with the help of allopathic or complementary therapies.

Influenza is also a viral infection and, although a vaccine has become available in recent years, the large number of different strains means that flu is still widespread. It is characterised by sudden onset with fever, extreme fatigue, muscle soreness as well as some or all of the symptoms of a cold. These symptoms can last up to two weeks and usually require the patient to rest completely for several days. Flu is responsible for many deaths each year and can be dangerous in very young or elderly patients and in those with an existing chronic condition such as diabetes or asthma. If flu is suspected in such cases or in any case where there is a prolonged high fever, the doctor should always be consulted.

Colds and flu spread more easily in the winter months due

to the cold weather - we tend to spend less time outdoors and turn the heating up indoors. This, together with close contact with others in the home, at school, at work or on public transport creates a perfect environment for the spread of a virus. And the bad news is, there is no cure! So we must concentrate on alleviating the symptoms and strengthening the body's natural defences.

## **Conventional treatment**

Allopathic treatments for cold and flu symptoms are widely available and include painkillers for relief of muscle aches and pains, sore throat, fever and headaches; nasal sprays or decongestants for a blocked nose; antihistamines to dry up runny nose and eyes; and cough suppressants.

Combination medications containing two or more of the above are also extremely popular due to both their convenience and economical nature. Such treatments do however have limitations. Many over the counter medicines, including some painkillers and decongestants, are not suitable for children or patients taking prescription medication - a pharmacist will be able to assist you in the appropriate choice. Additionally, these medicines treat a general group of symptoms, without considering the patient's individual needs or specific type of symptom.

## **Homeopathy**

Remedies may be taken safely by any patient including babies and those taking prescription medication without concerns regarding side-effects or interactions. Because homeopathy takes into account the overall picture - a person's emotional makeup and general health, the type of illness and specific "modalities" that make the symptoms better or worse - two patients presenting with the same complaint, such as a cold with fever, might very well be given different homeopathic remedies. For example, in treating a fever, Aconite or Belladonna might be recommended in cases of sudden onset, although Ferrum phos or Bryonia may be more appropriate if onset is gradual and depending on the modalities.

However, in a patient who is emotional, weepy and maintains that the symptoms improve outdoors, Pulsatilla may be more useful.

For flu, Gelsemium is often the remedy of choice, especially in symptoms characterised by shaking, chill and sore, aching muscles especially in patients who dislike cold and damp.

The table overleaf summarises the major remedies useful in the acute treatment of cold and flu symptoms.

However, self-prescribing is often difficult and the advice of a health

professional trained in homeopathy will always provide the most appropriate treatment and most effective outcome. This is especially important if receiving other homeopathic treatment from a qualified practitioner.

In Europe and America, a very popular homeopathic product called Oscillococcinum can be bought over the counter for the prevention and treatment of colds and flu. This product is not licensed for general retail sale in the UK, but might be obtained with a doctor's prescription.

### **Other therapies**

Aromatherapy oils can also be very good for relieving many of the symptoms of colds and flu, if used appropriately and after seeking professional advice. Oils can be used in an inhalation or diluted in a carrier oil such as almond or grapeseed for use in massage. Peppermint and eucalyptus oils can be used to clear the head, unblock the nose and ease muscular aches and pains. Peppermint oil can also be placed in a hot footbath to help draw toxins from the body. Tea tree oil is used for its intrinsic anti-viral properties and to boost immunity and

lavender oil is good for easing headaches, muscle aches and pains and soothing chesty coughs. For adults, add a few drops of oil to a bath, vaporiser or bowl of hot water and inhale. For children or babies, a few drops in a cup of warm water placed above the radiator in their bedroom at night can work wonders.

Herbal remedies, vitamins and supplements also have much to offer. A number of studies have shown that taking zinc and vitamin C during a cold can actually shorten its duration by as much as 50 per cent. The herb echinacea can boost the immune system and help prevent infection from taking hold if taken regularly.

<b>General Symptoms</b>	<b>Remedy</b>
First signs especially after a chill, thirsty, possibly anxious.	Aconite
Sudden onset, high fever, hot, red, throbbing headache, sensitive to light, noise.	Belladonna
Streaming nose (possibly eyes too), sneezing, clear discharge often thicker after 24-48 hours, prefers to suffer alone and shuns sympathy.	Natrum mur
Headache, pains all over, irritable, nauseous, (also good for a hangover!). Nose congested with little discharge, chilly – cannot get warm, even in bed.	Nux vomica
Established symptoms, headache, shivers, fatigue, aches and pains, alternating hot and cold, sore nose, very sleepy.	Gelsemium
Very thirsty, sore muscles/bones, headache, worse on movement.	Eupatorium perf
Fever, catarrh, burning nasal discharge, sneezing.	Arsenicum iod
Slow onset, mild fever, worse at night, better for cold, nosebleeds.	Ferrum phos
Catarrh in nose with thick discharge, ears feel blocked, worse at night, better in fresh air and with attention from loved ones.	Pulsatilla
Dry, painful cough, worse at night, thirsty - often most effective as a linctus.	Bryonia
A specialised combination remedy for the prevention and treatment of colds and flu. Often prescribed by homeopathic doctors for at risk patients.	Influenzinum/ Bacillinum

### **Home remedies**

Even so much as mention a runny nose or sore throat within earshot of my grandma and she'll promptly whip up a batch (or seven) of her famous chicken soup! If we consider some of the key ingredients, we begin to realise that the use of this traditional remedy actually has some basis in fact. It has a high salt content and, as we know, gargling with salted water helps to destroy bacteria and ease symptoms of a sore throat. Onions and garlic (the Allium remedies in homeopathy) are also excellent for colds.

While in the kitchen, ensure your cupboard is well stocked with honey to coat a dry, scratchy throat, lemon and other citrus fruits for their vitamin C and antioxidant properties and cinnamon for its anti-bacterial and anti-inflammatory properties. Tea prepared with these ingredients (or a "hot toddy" containing one other important Scottish ingredient) is very soothing and helps to promote a good night's sleep. Perhaps Grandma really does know best after all!



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