

## Management of Upper Respiratory Tract Infections

The term “upper respiratory tract infection (URI)” is a generalized term to describe any infection of the nose, sinus, throat, or upper airway. Typically, your doctor will refer to the common cold as a URI. This is by far the most common cause of a URI. The common cold is caused by a virus and cannot be treated with antibiotics. It is sometimes frustrating for patients to make an appointment with their doctor because they feel lousy, they want an antibiotic, and then they are told “its just a virus”. You may have gotten the same symptoms last year and after getting an antibiotic, your symptoms went away. This is likely because most viral illnesses last anywhere from 3 to 10 days. By the time most patients go to see a doctor, their symptoms from a virus are about to go away. Unlike with viruses, bacterial infections may require antibiotics. Your doctor may take a culture if there is any doubt to the type of infection, virus or bacteria (or rarely, fungal), that you have. Alternatively, a culture can be used to determine what type of bacteria and what antibiotics are best to treat an infection that you may have. Going to the pharmacy to pick medications to treat the symptoms of a URI can be a daunting task. Below is a list of over-the-counter medications that are very helpful in treating the symptoms of URIs.

### 1. Pain

**NSAIDS – Ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin)** are recommended to alleviate the aches and pains associated with URIs. This includes sore throat, sinus pressure, body aches, and fever. These medications can cause stomach irritation and caution should be taken using these if you have a history of stomach ulcers or if you take blood thinners, such as Plavix or Coumadin.

### 2. Nasal congestion and sinus pressure

**Decongestants** – Any time you see the letter “D” as part of a cold or allergy medication, it typically means that there is a decongestant added. **Pseudoephedrine** is a potent decongestant that often provides significant relief of nasal congestion and sinus pressure/pain (especially when used with Ibuprofen – in a preparation such as Advil Cold and Sinus). You must ask for this medication “behind the counter” at the pharmacy and give them your driver’s license.

**Phenylephrine** is a milder decongestant that is typically available in most cold medications that you will find in the main “cold section” of the pharmacy. Decongestants can temporarily raise the blood pressure and should not be taken if you have a history of a rapid heartbeat or significant heart disease. If there is any question about safety, consult your doctor.

**Saline sprays and rinses** – These can be very effective in temporarily relieving nasal congestion. They are not medicine and can be used as often as necessary to provide relief. Look for a **hypertonic spray or rinse** since these will help draw out moisture from the swollen tissues in your nose. If you find this irritating or too drying, then get an **isotonic spray/rinse**.

### 3. Cough- The body has a potent cough reflex to protect you against infectious secretions that can get trapped in your lungs. Occasionally, your doctor may not want to prescribe

potent antitussives for this reason. Mucinex Cough (or the generic equivalent) contains the 2 medications below.

**Guifenasin** – This is a medication that helps to thin the mucous and make it easier to cough out secretions. It does not suppress the cough.

**Dextromethorphan** – This medication is a mild antitussive, meaning it helps to suppress the cough.

**Narcotics (Codeine/hydrocodone)** – These are more potent antitussives, but they can cause nausea, depressed respirations and/or constipation. They also have the risk of being addicting.

#### 4. Runny Nose

**Antihistamines (Zyrtec, Benedryl, Chlorpheniramine)** – These medications prevent histamine from causing swelling and leaking from the tissues in your nose. They are helpful in treating both allergies and the symptoms of runny nose and sneezing from a URI. They can make you very tired, so they are best used at night. This is why antihistamines are found in most “nighttime” cold medicines. Claritin is probably the least sedating of the over-the-counter antihistamines, so if you get this side effect, and need daytime relief of a drippy, watery nose, Claritin is a decent choice. Note: if you have thick secretions or a bacterial sinus infection, antihistamines may not be recommended because these can thicken and trap the secretions leading to worsening symptoms.

#### 5. Direct cold treatment / Immune boosters

**Zinc** – Zinc has been shown to decrease the length and severity of the common cold. Some people cannot stand the metallic taste or get nauseous from these lozenges.

**Echinacea** – The therapeutic effectiveness of echinacea has not been established.

**Vitamin C** – Vitamin C in high concentrations can act as an anti-oxidant. However, its role in the treatment of URIs remains controversial.

**There are many preparations at the pharmacy that include various combinations of these medications.** Consider taking this sheet with you to the pharmacy so you know which specific medications to look for. **Remember to drink lots of electrolyte balanced fluids and get plenty of rest.**