

choking awareness

Looking after your lungs

Useful information and top tips



Colds and chest infections can be common, especially in the autumn and winter months. It is therefore very important that you look after your breathing, particularly if you have a history of breathing problems. Most chest infections get better on their own, but some can be life threatening. This leaflet shall provide information on how you can look after your breathing, what to do if you have a common cold or chest infection and simple changes you can make to your lifestyle, in order to look after your breathing.

Common cold

A common cold is a mild viral infection of the nose, throat, sinuses and upper airways. It can cause a blocked nose followed by a runny nose, sneezing, a sore throat and a cough.

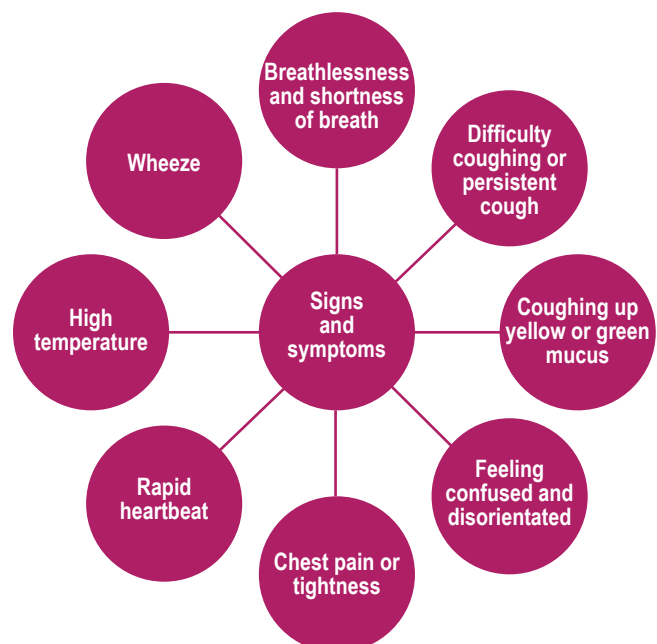
In adults and older children, the cold will usually last for about a week as the body fights off the infection. Colds in younger children can last up to two weeks.

There is no cure for a cold, although you can usually relieve the symptoms of a cold by taking over-the-counter medication – speak to your GP and local Pharmacist for further information on this. Drinking plenty of water can help too.

Chest infection

Chest infections are common, especially after a cold or flu. Although most are mild and get better on their own, some cases can be serious or even life-threatening.

You may also experience more general symptoms such as headache, fatigue, sweating or joint and muscle pain.



What causes chest infections?

A chest infection is an infection of the lungs or airways and is caused by bacteria, viruses or fungi. The main types of chest infection include bronchitis or pneumonia. Bronchitis is inflammation of the bronchi in the lungs. Pneumonia is inflammation of the lung tissue. These infections can be spread when an infected person coughs or sneezes onto their hands, then touches other people's hands, or objects and surfaces. If someone else touches these and then their nose or mouth, the infection can be passed on. Hand washing is very important. When you use a tissue put it in the bin after a single use!

Remember pneumonia can progress fast and can become life threatening. Contact your doctor if you have any symptoms that require urgent medical attention.

If someone has recurrent chest infections (occur often or repeatedly), sometimes this can be caused by Aspiration. This is where someone has difficulty swallowing food or struggles to manage saliva/mucus. Rather than swallowing food and it passing into the stomach; sometimes it can enter the lungs. This could cause the person to choke and could result in a chest infection. Sometimes food and drink will pass into the lungs with no outward signs ie. no coughing or choking, this is called silent aspiration. If a person is at risk of aspiration it is important that they are referred to Speech and Language Therapy for a swallow assessment. Also ensure their mouth is kept clean as bacteria from the mouth can be aspirated into the lungs causing a chest infection.

Caring for your symptoms at home

Many chest infections aren't serious and get better after a few days or weeks. You can improve your symptoms by:

- Resting to allow your body to recover
- Drinking water to help keep you hydrated and help clear secretions when you cough
- Treat headache and fever with painkillers – speak to your local pharmacist.
- A warm drink may relieve a persistent cough
- Sleeping with an extra pillow, raising your head, may make it easier to breath.

When to see a doctor....

- You feel very unwell and symptoms are more severe

- You have a persistent fever

- Symptoms last longer than 3 weeks

- You feel confused or drowsy

- You have chest pain or difficulty breathing

- You begin coughing up blood

- Your skin or lips look blue

- You are pregnant

- You are over 65

- You have a weakened immune system

- You have a long-term health condition

After seeing your doctor he may listen to your chest using a stethoscope, prescribe further medication or complete further tests such as a chest x-ray.

Preventing a chest infection

- Speak to your doctor about having a yearly flu vaccination
- Exercise – walking can be a great form of exercise. If this is difficult, upper body exercises can also help look after your breathing by expanding your lungs
- Encourage a strong cough, and clear any mucus from your lungs
- Improve your posture to allow air to move into your lungs more freely
- Keep comfortably warm to help maintain a constant temperature and help blood circulation
- Ensure you are upright when eating and drinking. Keep upright after eating and drinking for at least 30 minutes to aid digestion and breathing
- Eat slowly. If you start to cough whilst eating and drinking, stop and give yourself time to recover
- Keep as mobile as possible to help lungs inflate and take in oxygen – if not possible, a regular change of position is important
- Stop smoking and avoid alcohol
- Drink plenty of water
- Wash your hands regularly
- Breathing exercises – speak to a physiotherapist about this, via your GP



Recurrent chest infections or choking episodes

If you have recurrent chest infections or choking episodes, you should speak to your doctor about it as soon as possible and he may refer you to see a.....

Speech and Language Therapist – Assess your swallow and advise how to eat and drink safely. This can help to prevent chest infections and choking risk.

Physiotherapist – If you have recurrent chest infections a chest assessment by a physiotherapist may be of benefit. They may listen to your chest using a stethoscope and may give you breathing exercises to do, which can be made fun – blowing bubbles! They may also listen to you cough and advise you on your posture and other exercises that you can do.

