LIVING WELL

What Actually Helps a Cough or Cold?

A clear-eyed guide to the remedies that ease symptoms, the supplements with uncertain benefits, and the medicines that cannot cure a cold.

Relief is not the same as a cure

Your throat scratches, your nose closes up and the cough arrives just as you are trying to sleep. The medicine cupboard offers a crowded promise: suppress this, shorten that, fight everything. But a cold is usually a waiting game, and the useful question is not what will "kill" it. It is what might make the wait more bearable.

More than 200 viruses can cause a cold, with rhinoviruses the most common. Symptoms often begin a few days after infection. Most people feel better within a week or two, although individual symptoms can last 10 to 14 days. There is no cure that makes the underlying cold disappear.

Rest and plenty of fluids remain reasonable foundations. A clean humidifier or cool-mist vaporiser may help you feel more comfortable, while saline nose drops or spray can ease a blocked nose. Warm salt water can be used as a gargle. These measures manage symptoms; they do not shorten the infection or promise a quicker return to normal.

Over-the-counter medicines may temporarily relieve pain, fever, cough or congestion. Read the ingredients rather than relying on the front of the packet: combination cold products can contain a pain reliever that you are already taking separately. That creates a risk of taking a dangerous amount. A pharmacist or healthcare professional can help if you are unsure what overlaps.

Honey has the clearest cough case

A spoonful of honey sounds almost too ordinary beside a shelf of specialised cough mixtures. Yet among the remedies studied for upper respiratory tract infections, it has one of the more persuasive cases for symptom relief. That does not make it a cure, and it does not mean every comparison has produced a clear result.

A 2021 systematic review of 14 studies found that honey performed better than usual care for combined symptoms, cough frequency and cough severity. The overall risk of bias was moderate. In the smaller comparison with placebo, the result for combined symptoms was

uncertain, and the studies differed substantially. The fairest reading is that honey may soothe a cough, while better placebo-controlled trials are still needed.

Honey can be used for cough relief by adults and children who are at least one year old. It must not be given to a baby younger than one. Throat lozenges or cough drops are another option for temporary relief, but lozenges should not be given to children younger than four.

Steam from a shower or bowl of hot water is also suggested for comfort. With a young child, the practical option is sitting together in a bathroom while a shower produces steam. None of these measures removes the virus. Their value is smaller and more immediate: less coughing, a calmer throat or a little more comfort while the illness passes.

Zinc is not a simple, settled shortcut.

Supplements come with asterisks

Zinc is often sold as the remedy that will stop a cold taking hold. A 2024 review of 34 randomised trials involving 8,526 adults and children found little or no evidence that zinc prevents colds. For an existing cold, it may reduce average duration, but confidence in that finding was low and results varied widely between studies.

The same review found no clear improvement in overall symptom severity. Zinc used for treatment probably increased non-serious adverse effects, which included unpleasant taste, vomiting, stomach cramps and diarrhoea. The trials used different forms and approaches, and most had an unclear or high risk of bias somewhere in their methods. Zinc is not a simple, settled shortcut.

Vitamin C has a different but still limited story. A 2023 analysis of 10 placebo-controlled trials in people who were healthy at the outset found that oral vitamin C reduced overall cold severity by 15%. In a smaller group of comparisons, it appeared to have more effect on the duration of severe symptoms than on mild ones. It did not significantly shorten mild symptoms in that subset.

That review considered trials using relatively high daily amounts, so it does not show that a glass of juice will abruptly change an established cold. It also called for more research into vitamin C as a treatment. The evidence suggests a possible modest change in severity, not a cure-and not a reason to expect your cold to vanish overnight.

Prevention evidence is not rescue evidence

Probiotics are sometimes folded into the same conversation, but their evidence concerns

prevention rather than immediate rescue. A 2022 review included 23 usable trials and 6,950 participants across childhood, adulthood and older age. It found that probiotics may reduce the chance of having at least one acute upper respiratory infection and may reduce how often infections occur.

The review also found that probiotics may shorten an infection by a little over a day on average. But much of the evidence was judged low certainty. Products and study populations varied, and many interventions continued for more than three months. That is very different from starting a probiotic after you wake with a sore throat and expecting prompt relief.

Minor adverse effects were mainly digestive, including flatulence, diarrhoea, vomiting and bowel pain. The evidence did not show an overall increase in the number of people reporting at least one adverse event, but it cannot tell you that every probiotic product has the same effect. The trials often tested particular strains or combinations, not "probiotics" as one interchangeable thing.

For ordinary prevention, the less glamorous measures are more direct. Wash your hands with soap and water, avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth with unwashed hands, and avoid sharing cups or eating utensils when someone is ill. Cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue, discard it and wash your hands. Frequently touched surfaces can also be cleaned and disinfected.

Antibiotics cannot treat the virus

Antibiotics treat bacterial infections, not the viruses that cause colds. Taking them for an uncomplicated cold will not make you feel better. Unnecessary antibiotics can also cause harms ranging from a rash to severe allergic reactions, antibiotic-resistant infections and serious diarrhoeal illness.

A viral illness can occasionally be followed by a bacterial infection such as pneumonia, which may require antibiotics. That decision depends on a medical assessment, not on how unpleasant the first few days feel. A cough that is noisy, exhausting or persistent is not by itself proof that antibiotics are needed.

Cold-like symptoms can also be caused by flu or coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). If you suspect either-especially if you have a higher risk of severe illness-testing and prompt contact with a healthcare professional matter because antiviral treatments are available and work best when started soon after symptoms begin. There are no antiviral medicines for the other respiratory viruses that commonly cause cold symptoms.

Get medical care for trouble breathing or fast breathing, dehydration, fever lasting longer than

four days, or symptoms that continue beyond 10 days without improving. The same applies if fever or cough improves and then returns or worsens, or if a chronic medical condition gets worse. Severe or concerning symptoms do not have to fit neatly into that list.

Make a small sick-day kit

Before the next cold arrives, gather the few objects that match the evidence: saline nose spray, tissues, honey, throat lozenges and a clean cool-mist humidifier if you already use one. Add soap where it is easy to reach. For a household with young children, remember that honey and lozenges have age limits.

Keep the selection simple. A shelf full of overlapping combination medicines makes ingredient duplication easier, not recovery faster. If you choose an over-the-counter medicine, check its active ingredients and directions, and compare them with anything else you take. Ask a pharmacist or healthcare professional when the list is unclear.

Then use the kit for what it can do. Saline may ease congestion. Honey or a lozenge may calm a cough or throat. Fluids, rest and humidified air may make the waiting more comfortable. None promises to end the infection, and that boundary is the most useful thing to remember when a label or supplement makes a bigger claim.

This week, clear one small space and put the saline spray, tissues, honey and lozenges together. It takes only those ordinary supplies-and it leaves less room for panic-buying a cure that does not exist.

Where this comes from

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- Nose Injuries and Disorders

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