

## *Colds & coughs*

**Colds** – are only caused by viruses and as antibiotics are ineffective against viruses, they have no place in the treatment of colds. The symptoms of a cold, the stuffy nose, the dry throat and the sore head, normally only last a few days and while unpleasant and uncomfortable can normally be kept under control with regular paracetamol, aspirin or ibuprofen.

**Children under the age of 13 years with a temperature should not be treated with aspirin.** Paracetamol is every bit as effective a treatment, as is ibuprofen. (Ibuprofen has the added benefit of lasting 2 to 3 hours longer than paracetamol.)

**Coughs** – are also caused by a virus infection and generally get better within a week or so at most. Virus infections of the upper airways can trigger asthma in susceptible children and can cause chronic chest conditions like bronchitis to flare up. People with chest conditions should seek advice if their condition worsens but otherwise healthy individuals need only treat themselves with a cough bottle of their choice. While your body will clear the virus from your airways quite quickly, the inflammation takes longer to settle and your cough is always the last symptom to go. The inflammation in your airways causes increased production of mucous and that is why your cough may be productive of sputum, which may be clear or even green in colour. Neither clear nor coloured sputum are a sign of infection in your chest, and will clear without recourse to antibiotics.

**Sore throats** – are often caused by viruses but can be caused by bacteria also. Whether virus or bacteria your body will clear the infection most times within 3 or 4 days without the need for antibiotics. If your throat has been getting worse over the last 3 to 4 days and you are feeling generally unwell with a temperature or you are having difficulty swallowing even liquids because your throat is so sore, then you should seek advice when the surgery is open again but take something for your throat now! It won't make a difference to the appearance of your throat and you will feel better. Sipping ice cubes or ice cream will also help and some lozenges or throat sprays from the chemist may also make things feel more

comfortable until you get better. Sore throats that have been present for weeks are rarely due to infection. They are usually the result of breathing through your mouth while asleep or from working in a dry or air-conditioned office.

**Fever** – or a raised temperature accompanying a cough or a cold is usually a sign to stay off work/school, get yourself off to bed, treat yourself with plenty of fluids and regular doses of aspirin, paracetamol or ibuprofen. Fever in young children (pre-school) can trigger a convulsion in those susceptible to it, and a high temperature should be treated promptly with determination in these youngsters. Children with a high temperature are miserable, restless and often vomit, especially if you are trying to give them liquids and paracetamol. There is no magic about treating a child with a high temperature, strip their clothes down to their pants or nappies, make sure the room is cooler rather than warm and wet their bodies and head with a tepid sponge or flannel. This is the most effective way to lower their temperature but you have to keep repeating it until they can take their paracetamol or ibuprofen and keep it down. They will be a lot less miserable when their temperature is nearer normal.

**Flu** - or influenza is again caused by a virus and is often seen in epidemics during the winter months. Many of the symptoms are the same as a cold but worse and they are often accompanied by muscle pain and tenderness. The treatment is, get off to bed, drink plenty of fluids and dose yourself regularly with aspirin, paracetamol or ibuprofen. Patients with chest complaints like asthma or chronic bronchitis or emphysema or COPD, or patients with heart complaints or patients with diabetes should protect themselves by having their annual flu vaccination and they should also have a pneumonia jab once in their lives.