

A Handy Sheet About...

Upper Respiratory Tract Infections

(URTI)

Most respiratory infections are caused by viral infections, and usually soon go. This leaflet gives some tips on what to do, and what symptoms to look out for which may indicate a more serious illness.

Infections affecting the throat (larynx), or the main airway (trachea), or the airways going into the lungs (bronchi) are common. These infections are sometimes called laryngitis, tracheitis, or bronchitis. Doctors often just use the term URTI - upper respiratory tract infection - to include any, or all of these. Most URTIs are due to virus infections.

What are the symptoms of a URTI?

Cough is usually the main symptom. Other symptoms include fever, headache, aches and pains. Cold symptoms may occur if the infection also affects the nose. Symptoms typically peak after 2-3 days, and then gradually clear. However, the cough may persist after the infection has gone. This is because the inflammation in the airways caused by the infection can take a while to clear. It may take up to 4 weeks after other symptoms have gone for the cough to clear completely.

Dr O'Donnell & Partners
The Farnham Centre *for* Health
Hale Road, Farnham, Surrey GU9 9QS
Telephone: 01252 737387 Fax: 01252 728302

www.odonnellpractice.co.uk

What is the treatment for an URTI?

There is no 'quick fix' for a cough due to a virus infection. You need to be patient until the cough goes. Most viral infections clear without treatment. The body's immune system fights them off.

- **Take paracetamol, ibuprofen, or aspirin** to reduce fever (high temperature), and to ease any aches, pains and headaches. (Children under 16 should not take aspirin.)
- **Have lots to drink** if you have a fever, to prevent mild dehydration.
- **A cough medicine that you can buy at pharmacies** may help, but there is little evidence that they work. They often contain several ingredients in addition to those aimed at the cough. For example, some cause drowsiness, which may help with sleep. Some contain decongestants, which may help relieve a bunged-up nose. Some contain paracetamol, so be careful that you do not take these in addition to paracetamol tablets. Ask a pharmacist for advice.
- **Antibiotics are not usually advised.** Antibiotics do not kill viruses - they only kill bacteria. Antibiotics do not usually improve a URTI. Antibiotics may even make symptoms worse as some people develop side effects such as diarrhoea, feeling sick, and rashes.

What symptoms should I look out for?

Most URTIs clear without complications. Occasionally the infection can travel to the lungs and cause pneumonia, or allow a more serious secondary (additional) infection with bacteria. Other causes of cough (such as asthma) are sometimes confused with a viral infection. See a doctor if any of the following occur.

- If symptoms such as fever, chest pains, or headaches become worse or severe.
- If you develop breathing difficulties, such as wheezing or shortness of breath.
- If you cough up blood.
- If you become drowsy or confused.
- If you develop any symptoms which you are unhappy about, or do not understand.
- If you have a cough that persists longer than 3-4 weeks.

Notes:

