**Advice for Adults and Children with Respiratory Infections**

Respiratory infections are infections of your ears, nose, throat, voice box, or lungs. They are extremely common and are usually caused by viruses which cannot be treated with antibiotics. Almost all are mild and get better on their own without needing any medical help.

An adult may get 2-4 respiratory infections per year and children can get 8-12 infections a year. This means that the total number of these types of infections is probably greater than all of available GP appointments per year across the UK - around 370 million a year in total!

This is why knowing how to self-manage these infections is so important. It is also very important that the small number of people who may become seriously ill from one of these infections know when and how to seek help.

We would like you to read this information as it may help you to know whether you or the person you are caring for needs a medical assessment today, or can safely manage the illness at home.

**If, having read this document and the helpful advice on the NHS website, you are still concerned that you or the person you are caring for needs urgent medical attention today, please contact us now by phoning the surgery.**

**VIRAL RESPIRATORY INFECTIONS**

Respiratory infections are extremely common and generally cause mild symptoms that get better without any treatment or the need for any medical assessment or care.

Most of these infections are mild and are caused by viruses which **CANNOT BE TREATED WITH ANTIBIOTICS.**

**Many patients believe that they need to take antibiotics when they have the symptoms listed below. This is unnecessary, increases antibiotic resistance, harms your body’s good bacteria, puts you at risk of side effects and even serious allergic reactions, and most importantly, uses up scarce NHS resources on GP appointments or A&E attendances that are not necessary.**

**In addition, attending the GP surgery when it is not necessary risks spreading these infections to other patients and practice staff**

**It is common for symptoms to get better whilst taking antibiotics. This is most likely because the immune system is clearing the infection over the course of the week when the antibiotics are taken – NOT because of the antibiotics themselves. This leads to the mistaken believe that the antibiotics worked to clear the infection. Further, if the antibiotics do not work, this is further evidence that the infection is most likely viral and further courses or ‘stronger’ antibiotics are not the answer.**

Common symptoms of viral respiratory infections include:

1. Snotty, runny or blocked nose (rhinitis)
2. Sore throat (pharyngitis)
3. Chesty cough (bronchitis)
4. Hoarse voice (laryngitis)
5. Fever symptoms – feeling hot/cold/shivery/achy
6. Headache
7. Sometimes diarrhoea and/or vomiting (as some of these viruses can also affect the digestive system).

If you have these symptoms, particularly those numbered 1-3 above, during the same illness, it’s highly likely that you have a viral respiratory infection. The good news is that these infections are usually mild, and **most people will get better in 1-3 weeks without needing any medical help or treatment.**

Please read the advice on the NHS website:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/respiratory-tract-infection/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/chest-infection/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/sore-throat/>

**You can help yourself, other people and the NHS by ensuring you take up any offers of COVID and INFLUENZA vaccine every year. These may not stop you catching it, but having them means that if you do catch one of these infections it’s likely to be mild.**

**BACTERIAL RESPIRATORY INFECTIONS**

Sometimes bacteria can cause infection too, most commonly tonsillitis (although most cases of tonsillitis are viral) and otitis media (middle ear infection). They can also cause pneumonia.

**Strep A throat infection/tonsillitis/Scarlet fever**

At the moment there is a lot of public concern regarding **Group A Strep** – a type of bacterial infection that commonly causes tonsillitis and Scarlet Fever, however very rarely it can cause severe or life-threatening illness in children and adults. There have been some very sad cases documented in the media where some children and adults have tragically lost their lives due to what is known at ‘Invasive Group A Strep’. Serious illness from Strep A has always been around, is not new, and affects every country of the world. Rates seem to be higher than usual for the time of year though. Around 1 in 8 people at any given time carry this bacteria in their throat without having any symptoms.

Please seek medical advice if you have the following symptoms:

* 1. You have a very painful sore throat to the point where you are struggling to swallow due to the pain
  2. Fever
  3. NO cough or a snotty/blocked nose (lack of these symptoms makes bacterial infection more likely)
  4. You can see large tonsils or a very red, inflamed throat with white spots or patches. It’s helpful if you can take photos to send into us too via our website.
  5. You suspect Scarlet Fever, having read the documents below and looked at the photos.

You can read more about Scarlet Fever (a type of strep throat infection) here:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/scarlet-fever/>

<https://www.gosh.nhs.uk/news/scarlet-fever-and-invasive-group-a-strep-advice-for-parents-and-carers/>

<https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/streptococcus-a-strep-a>

If you believe you have symptoms of Scarlet Fever, please contact us today.

**Pneumonia**

Pneumonia is an infection low down in your lungs – the part of your lungs that enables oxygen to get into your bloodstream. This causes breathlessness, and often chest pain when you take a deep breath in and out where the infection is. It is often accompanied by uncontrollable shivers/shakes/sweats, drowsiness or even confusion as your body’s immune system goes into overdrive to try and clear the infection. It does not always cause a cough, particularly if the infection is very low down in your lung.

You can read more about pneumonia here, including when and how to get medical help:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pneumonia/>

**Ear infections and sinusitis**

Ear infections typically cause sudden onset ear pain and reduced hearing, often with fever or other symptoms of respiratory tract infections. Sometimes the ear will leak fluid. Many of these infections will get better on their own without any treatment, however seek prompt advice if:

* + 1. The ear is so painful you can’t manage with over the counter pain relief and it’s stopping you from sleeping
    2. You have sudden total hearing loss in one ear, particularly if it’s painless. IT IS VERY IMPORTANT YOU GET MEDICAL HELP ON THE SAME DAY.
    3. The symptoms are severe and have been going on for more than 3 days without any improvement
    4. Your ear is leaking fluid.

Please read: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/ear-infections/>

Sinus infections are also very common, particularly when there is a lot of nasal congestion and snot. They cause nasty facial pain mainly below the eyes, especially when coughing, straining or bending down. They are usually caused by viral infections. Even sinusitis caused by bacteria usually get better on their own and antibiotics do not work well as they can’t get into the space where the infection is.

Take over the counter pain relief, try nasal decongestants available over the counter at the pharmacy, and wait for your immune system to fight the infection off, usually in 1-2 weeks. It’s not pleasant, but you can expect it to get better on its own.

Please read: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/sinusitis-sinus-infection/>

**Self-monitoring at home and when to seek urgent medical help**

Rarely, people can become seriously unwell from either a viral or bacterial infection and need urgent medical assessment and treatment. It is important to know what to look for so you know when to seek medical help and when you can safely manage these infections by yourself at home.

**For all types of respiratory infection in children and adults, not just Strep A, you should seek prompt medical advice if:**

1. **You or the person you are caring for are significantly breathless/short of breath or breathing faster than you would expect.**
2. **You or the person you are caring for are extremely tired/fatigued to the point where it is extremely difficult to get to the toilet or move around the house.**
3. **You or the person you are caring for have had recurrent fever symptoms for more than 5 days, or have uncontrollable shivers/shakes, known as rigors.**
4. **You or the person you are caring for are severely dehydrated**
5. **You or the person you are caring for appears confused or delirious**
6. **You or the person you are caring for are experiencing severe sharp stabbing chest pain over one or other lung particularly when deep breathing.**
7. **You have a rash – please send us clear photos taken in good light, in sharp focus. Most rashes are not serious and are common with viral infections, but it’s good to check.**
8. **You have an underlying lung or medical condition that you believe places you at increased risk of more serious infection, such as COPD, bronchiectasis, or a suppressed immune system.**

**Specific advice for monitoring very young children and babies:**

It can be harder to know if your young baby or toddler is unwell or needs a medical assessment. At the same time, respiratory tract infections are probably more common in the pre-school age group than in any other age group.

They generally have similar symptoms to older children and adults, but may not be able to tell you about them. That’s why monitoring them for the following red flag symptoms is very important:

* 1. **Fast breathing, especially if the skin in between or below or above the ribs is being ‘sucked in’ with each breath.**
  2. **A cough which sounds like a dog or seal barking (this is called CROUP)**
  3. **A rasping, gasping sound when breathing in or out with every breath.**
  4. **Significant drowsiness even when the temperature is normal.**
  5. **Severely dehydrated (no wet nappies for 12 hours or more, dry mouth/lack of saliva)**
  6. **Confusion**
  7. **A rash, especially if it does not blanch with the glass test.**

If you notice any of these symptoms, please seek prompt medical advice.

**Please familiarise yourself with the following:**

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/health/is-your-baby-or-toddler-seriously-ill/>

<https://www.gosh.nhs.uk/news/scarlet-fever-and-invasive-group-a-strep-advice-for-parents-and-carers/>

If you are still uncertain and worried, please contact us today.

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