Viral Upper Respiratory Tract Infection – Clinician Guide

Diagnosis

- Upper respiratory tract infections (URIs) or "the common cold" are generally caused by viruses
- Present with symptoms such as rhinorrhea, sneezing, sinus congestion, sore throat, cough, low-grade fever, headache, and fatigue
- Occur throughout the year
- Color of nasal discharge does not differentiate a viral infection from a bacterial one
- History and physical examination should focus on identifying alternative diagnoses:
    - Potential bacterial diagnoses: sinusitis, streptococcal pharyngitis, bacterial pneumonia, etc.
    - Exacerbations of chronic medical conditions: asthma, heart failure, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, etc.
    - Recurrent or chronic symptoms: allergic or seasonal rhinitis

Treatment

- Antibiotics are not indicated for the treatment of the common cold[1]
- Patients should be advised to rest and stay hydrated
- Consider the following treatments for symptom management in adults and children ≥ 6 years of age:[2-6]
    - Analgesics (acetaminophen and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs): help reduce fever and pain
    - Systemic decongestants: may decrease nasal congestion
- Intranasal decongestants (should not be used for more than 5 days), oral decongestants, antihistamine-decongestant combinations, and antihistamine-decongestant-analgesic combinations—have a limited benefit
- The American Academy of Pediatrics does not recommend cough and cold medicines for children younger than 6 years of age and does not generally recommend cough and cold medicines for children 6–12 years because of reports of harm, including apnea and serious overdoses[7-9]
- Consider the following treatments for symptom management in children:
    - Honey: for sore throat (ONLY for children over 1 year of age)[10]
    - Cool-mist humidifier: for sore throat and congestion
    - Nasal saline drops and bulb suctioning for infants
- No strong data for or against echinacea, zinc, or vitamin C for the treatment or prevention of common colds; while it is not clear if these treatments help, they are generally unlikely to cause harm[11-13]

Prevention

- Common cold viruses are spread by hand contact and droplets
- To avoid transmission to others, encourage frequent hand washing, cough and sneeze into a tissue or into the arm rather than the hand, wear a face mask, and avoid touching the face
- The incubation period for most viral causes of the common cold is 1–3 days and patients may be infectious as long as symptoms are present

Followup

- Symptoms usually last about 1 week and up to 2 weeks; cough may last up to 3 weeks and sometimes even longer[1]
- Seek in-person medical care if symptoms have not improved after 10 days or if high fever (above 102 degrees F), confusion, lethargy, difficulty breathing or swallowing, severe headache, pain in the face or forehead, or severe fatigue occur

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