

Common Infection Leaflet

Understanding Common Infections

Common infections are illnesses that many people experience from time to time. They are most often caused by viruses and, less commonly, by bacteria. In most cases, these infections are mild and improve on their own with rest and simple self-care.

Common infections can affect different parts of the body and may cause everyday symptoms that make you feel unwell or uncomfortable. While recovery time can vary between individuals, most people recover fully without complications.

Common infections may affect:

- The eyes, causing redness, irritation, or discharge
- The chest, leading to coughing or breathing discomfort
- The ears, nose, or throat, which may feel sore, blocked, or painful
- The stomach and bowel, sometimes causing sickness or diarrhoea

In the sections below, we explain common symptoms, how to care for yourself, when to seek medical advice, and how to reduce the risk of spreading infection to others.

Recognising symptoms of common infections

Symptoms depend on which part of the body is affected and how your immune system responds. Some people may feel mildly unwell, while others may experience more noticeable symptoms.

Infections affecting the eyes may cause redness, irritation, a gritty or burning sensation, or sticky discharge.

If the chest is affected, symptoms may include coughing, shortness of breath, or mucus that appears yellow or green.

Symptoms involving the ears, nose, or throat can include pain, soreness, swollen glands or tonsils, and a blocked or runny nose.

When the stomach or bowel is affected, symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, or abdominal discomfort.

Not everyone experiences all symptoms. Many people begin to feel better gradually as their body clears the infection.

How common are everyday infections?

Common infections affect a large number of people each year and are a normal part of everyday life. Most adults experience several minor infections over time, particularly those involving the nose, throat, or chest.

Some infections are more common than others. Colds and throat infections occur frequently, while stomach and bowel infections are also common. Certain infections may occur more often during colder months or when infections are circulating in the community. Most people recover without medical treatment.

Looking after yourself during a common infection

Most common infections can be safely managed at home. Giving your body time to recover is important.

Self-care measures include:

- Getting plenty of rest
- Drinking fluids regularly to prevent dehydration
- Eating light meals if your appetite is reduced

Pain relief medicines may be used if needed, as long as you follow the instructions on the packaging or advice from a healthcare professional. Some symptoms, such as coughs or sore throats, may improve with appropriate pharmacy treatments.

For eye discomfort, gently cleaning around the eye with a clean cloth soaked in cooled, boiled water may help. Always wash your hands before and after touching the eye area.

If symptoms do not improve or begin to worsen, medical advice should be sought.

How long do common infections usually last?

The length of recovery varies depending on the type of infection and individual health.

- Colds and throat symptoms often improve within one to two weeks
- Coughs may take several weeks to fully settle
- Stomach and bowel infections often improve within a few days
- Sinus or eye infections may take longer to clear

If symptoms last longer than expected or continue to worsen, contact your GP or another healthcare professional for advice.

Do common infections need antibiotics?

Most common infections are caused by viruses, which means antibiotics are usually not needed. Your immune system can often clear these infections without medical treatment.

Antibiotics may be prescribed if a bacterial infection is suspected and symptoms are severe or not improving. A healthcare professional will assess your condition and discuss treatment options with you if antibiotics are required.

Using antibiotics when they are not needed can cause side effects and reduce their effectiveness in the future. Always take antibiotics only if they are prescribed and follow the instructions given.

Reducing the spread of infection

Simple steps can help lower the risk of passing an infection to others, especially people who may be more vulnerable.

- Covering your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing
- Using tissues and disposing of them promptly
- Cleaning your hands regularly with soap and water or hand sanitiser
- Avoiding touching your face with unwashed hands
- Not sharing personal items such as cups, cutlery, or toothbrushes
- Keeping some distance from others when you are unwell

Staying up to date with recommended vaccinations, including seasonal vaccines if eligible, also helps protect you and those around you.

When symptoms may need urgent medical advice

Most people with common infections recover fully without complications. However, some symptoms are uncommon and may indicate a more serious illness.

Seek urgent medical advice if you experience:

- A high or unusually low temperature
- Severe headache with vomiting
- Chest pain or difficulty breathing
- Difficulty swallowing
- A very fast or very slow heart rate
- Coughing up blood

- Pain in your back just below the ribs
- Very cold, pale, or clammy skin

If you feel increasingly unwell or are worried about your symptoms, contact your GP promptly or use urgent healthcare services.

Signs of sepsis and what to do

Sepsis is a rare but serious medical emergency caused by the body's response to infection. It can develop quickly and requires immediate treatment.

Possible warning signs include confusion or drowsiness, severe shivering, extreme breathlessness, passing little or no urine, mottled or discoloured skin, or a strong feeling that something is seriously wrong.

If you think you or someone else may have sepsis, call 999 immediately. Prompt treatment can be life-saving.