

Cochrane Corner

Decongestants and antihistamines for the common cold

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The common cold is almost certainly the most frequent illness known. The typical symptoms are sneezing, nasal discharge, nasal obstruction, cough, malaise etc. Children are affected more frequently than adults, with on average six colds per year compared to fewer than four colds

per year for the average adult. The common cold is a self-limiting disease and two-thirds of sufferers recover within a week. While the morbidity is low it contributes to a considerable amount of time off work. The cause of the common cold is a viral infection. The infection is trans-

mitted to the nasal epithelium by airborne droplets, and by hand to face transfer. Treatment is focused on alleviating symptoms, as there is no cure or vaccination for the common cold. The common treatments (symptom control) include decongestants and anti-histamines.

Compound	Benefits*	Harms	Evidence	Comments
Anti histamine decongestants combinations	Effective NNT = 3 in adults and children over the age of 5 years.	Dry mouth and drowsiness	Cochrane review ¹	No evidence in younger children. Both sedating combinations (e.g. Actifed) and non sedating (e.g. Clarinase) seem to be effective
Antihistamines alone	Possible small benefit in adults and children >5 years	Drowsiness	Cochrane review ¹	Benefits may not be clinically significant
Decongestants	Single doses seem to be effective. Limited information on multiple doses	Dry mouth	Cochrane review ²	The studies used (NZ) pseudoephedrine 60mg tablets and oxymetazoline (Drixine and At-eze drops)

NNT = numbers needed to treat for one improvement

* generally beneficial for nasal obstruction, rhinorrhoea and sneezing

References

1. De Sutter AIM, Lemiengre M, Campbell H, Mackinnon HF. Antihistamines for the common cold (Cochrane Review). In: The Cochrane Library, Issue 2, 2004. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
2. Taverner D, Bickford L, Draper M. Nasal decongestants for the common cold (Cochrane Review). In: The Cochrane Library, Issue 2, 2004. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Members of the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners can have access to the full reviews by contacting Cherylyn Pearson at the College in Wellington. For the access codes to the Cochrane library contact cpearson@rnzcgp.org.nz at the College.