

## **Colds and flu**

Colds are a contagious infection of the upper respiratory passages, caused by one or more of 100 different rhinoviruses. Sneezing and a sore throat are accompanied by fever, headache, general malaise, a runny or stuffed nose and reddened, watering eyes. Many people will claim they have flu in the pharmacy but are really suffering from a cold.

There is no cure for the common colds but a wide range of products can offer symptomatic relief.

Aches and pains, and fever and high temperatures can be relieved with paracetamol, ibuprofen or aspirin. The patient's attention should be drawn to the paracetamol content of cold remedy and the maximum daily dose, as overdosage may occur if the patient also takes oral analgesics. Asthmatics and those with stomach problems should not take ibuprofen.

Antihistamines are often included in cold remedies for their drying effect. Older generation antihistamines, such as chlorpheniramine and brompheniramine, can cause drowsiness. Patients with glaucoma should not use antihistamines, unless the doctor specifically allows this.

Adrenergic agents such as ephedrine, phenylephrine, phenylpropanolamine, pseudoephedrine oxymetazoline and xylometazoline, are included in cold remedies for their decongestant effect. Topical preparations, such as nasal sprays, are only intended for short-term use as they can cause rebound congestion if used for longer periods. These products have sympathomimetic effects and should not be recommended to patients with high blood pressure, hyperthyroidism, coronary heart disease, diabetes, glaucoma, enlarged prostate, or those on monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs). They also have varying stimulant effects and should be avoided at bedtime if affected. Inhalations of warm moist air are helpful and can be encouraged with the use of volatile substances such as menthol and eucalyptus.

An acute cold has serious implications for patients with long-term chest conditions, such as bronchitis or emphysema, and these patients should be referred to the doctor.

Bacterial infection is a possible complication and patients with sustained high temperature, or those with white or yellow spots on the tonsils require further investigation.

Although zinc is being suggested as being of use in reducing the severity of a cold, not products are available over the counter, which have been proven to have that effect.