Not To Be Sneezed At

When I was a junior doctor at Guy’s, forty years ago, I remember going out to see some surgeries in South-East London. One stuck in my memory. It was a run-down converted shop unit in New Cross with a characterless utilitarian waiting room with a large shop window, plastic chairs and curly edged notices. A sign said “I can cure your cold in seven days; do it yourself and it will take a week!”

I don’t think the Chief Medical Officer’s message was so different last week although it may not have been quite so blatant.

We are firmly in the cold season. The symptoms are caused by a host of different viruses that affect the upper respiratory tract. The symptoms are well-known; coughing, sneezing, runny nose, muscular aches and pains and sore throat and, in the case of men, a near-death experience allegedly. The temperature rises and taste and smell are lost.

The cold is the most commonly occurring disease in the world and it has been estimated that in the UK individuals have 180 million colds a year. Because there are so many different strains of cold virus, at least 200, having a cold does not give immunity to the other strains which is why some people may have two, four, six, or more colds in a season.

The common cold is a self-limiting disease which can be managed at home. Other things to remember about the cold:

• It is treated with symptomatic relief to lower temperature, relieve sore throat and control aches and pains
• It is not treatable with antibiotic. It is a virus, not a bacterium.
• It is not preventable with a vaccine. Even if one could be created to a strain of cold virus, there are many others and, in any case, they mutate so that their structure changes and an effective vaccine would rapidly become ineffective.
• Going out in the cold does not give you a cold! However, the virus is more prevalent during the winter months, believed to be the result of lower humidity, although of course, during cold
The cold virus is easily spread to others, generally by *coughing* and *sneezing*. Get the nasal mucus on your *hands* and they become effective transmitters if they touch door handles, computer keyboards, coffee cups, telephones and tables with which others have contact. The virus can live for up to twenty-four hours. You are infectious for a few days before the symptoms start and all the time you are coughing and sneezing (so for a week or more).

**Therefore to prevent a cold**, keep your hands clean, don’t use the towel that a cold sufferer has just used, avoid crowded areas if that is possible and ideally spend the winter on a beach in Tahiti.

For some people a cold may be more serious. Certain groups are more vulnerable to the disease itself and its possible complications:

- The elderly
- The young because their immunity is not well developed
- Those with chronic illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease and chronic lung disease
- Those with impaired immune systems, for example taking anti-cancer chemotherapy or having HIV/AIDS.

For others, there may be some underlying pathology if symptoms last more than a fortnight, if it is a struggle to breathe or if symptoms suddenly worsen or new symptoms develop. In such circumstances it may become necessary to seek medical advice.

The age old question is whether to go to work with a cold. It isn’t serious after all. However, you may spread it, perhaps to people less able to cope with it. If you are feeling terrible you may be more likely to make mistakes. Your colleagues may be very glad if you are not there!

Many confuse a cold with influenza. In terms of symptoms, it is all a matter of degree.Typically a cold is a milder illness than influenza. The influenza sufferer is more, often much more, ill with a more severe and abrupt onset, with high fever, headache, very painful muscles and body aching, dry persistent cough, vomiting and debilitating weakness. Generally the two conditions can be differentiated on the severity of the symptoms but there is a laboratory diagnosis to confirm an influenza diagnosis if differentiation is important.

So, not serious and easily treated symptomatically with the paracetamol or ibuprofen. I’m not sure about the value of honey and lemon but I do tend to favour a Penderyn Welsh whiskey as well. (mind you I favour that if I haven’t got a cold).

Good luck for a cold-free winter and try not to get sneezed at!

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