



Ah-Choo!: The Uncommon Life of Your Common Cold

Jennifer Ackerman

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A quarter of the people infected with a cold virus don't get sick. What's so different about these folks?

When it comes to colds, being young is no advantage: Teenagers catch twice as many as people over fifty.

It's strange but true: If you want to tamp down cold symptoms, "boosting" your immune system is actually the last thing you want to do!

The ways colds spread may surprise you. You're probably less likely to get a cold from kissing or getting sneezed on, than you are from a simple handshake.

Some cold viruses may be capable of triggering not just colds but corpulence-not just fevers but fat!

Social butterflies get off easy: People with big, diverse social networks actually get fewer colds than those with limited social circles.

Believe it or not, colds can kill.

You're right: Children do have runnier noses-and for good reason.

When you have a cold, TLC may be the best medicine. Studies show simple empathy may be as effective as potent drugs in treating colds, cutting short their duration by a whole day. That's more than over-the-counter medications can claim!

Ah-Choo!: The Uncommon Life of Your Common Cold Details

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Maggiemuggins says

Unavoidably disgusting but . . . if you were thinking of propping the book up to read while eating lunch, my advice would be - don't, especially if lunch includes cream of mushroom soup or something similar in appearance or texture. However, that caveat aside, the more we all understand the causes, effects and possible management of our colds, and the results of current research, surely the better for all of us.

So, finish your lunch first, overcome your natural revulsion, take a deep breath and dive in. The ins and outs, ups and downs, could be's, maybe's, and worth a try's, of the various ongoing trials are worth knowing about.

The book becomes less yucky after the first couple of chapters, so stay with it, learn what is and isn't the truth about the common cold, and you will be rewarded at the end with remedies and advice for every member of the family on how to make colds less miserable . . . and recipes for comfort foods.

Vincent says

Not quite sure where the author was going with this. Good points sprinkled throughout, but it wasn't a cohesive piece of work.

Ericka Clouther says

The structure of this book is to discuss particular topics or studies by using the interviews with different researchers and recording what they say. However, the researchers don't agree on a number of things. Also, there is a lot that's just general uncertain or nuanced in viral research. (Although this book was written 6 years ago, there's not a lot of new science on this yet.) The effect of this book structure is that it feels disorganized and not very informative.

But the appendix is actually pretty well organized and succinct. You could read the book backwards- read the appendix first for the most important and more certain evidence. Then you could either stop or go back and read the book to see where this evidence came from- the history and research that provided the information in the appendix. The author failed to discuss how antibacterial lotions can be very harmful, but possibly that's newer research.

My take-away is: wash your hands thoroughly with soap, mostly to avoid things that are worse than colds (because colds are actually pretty good for you in the scheme of things); if you get a cold, hydrate and eat chicken soup because it actually helps with the symptoms of a cold; over-the-counter stuff will only mask symptoms sometimes but do nothing to help shorten or avoid the cold; many medications are too dangerous for children, as is the risk of overdose to children from using more than one medication. If you're an adult go ahead and enjoy a hot toddy. Yum.

However, I have kids, and I feel like this failed to address my main issues: (1) How to know if the kids have a cold, a flu, or even something else? (2) How to keep a minor cold or flu from turning into some kind of infection in my kids that ends up requiring antibiotics (sinus or ear infection)? (3) How much to let them cough or try to suppress an excessive or nighttime cough with things such as honey?

Sandra Strange says

What a delightful read! If you have any interest in colds, the operations of your body, viruses or science in general, you will want to read this book! In sprightly, organized, entertaining form, the book informs the reader about what colds are and aren't, how colds operate in the body, how they spread, and how you should take care of yourself to treat or avoid catching one, blasting many old wives tales and misinformation you might think true.

Kelly Martin says

Some parts of this book were hard slugging, but most of it was very interesting..not not much help in keeping well.

Megan says

I thought this was really interesting and the information in it was fascinating. If you like non-fiction science writing this is one you should check out.

Elise says

I thought this book was interesting. I thought the most helpful part was where the author detailed what the "cold experts" do for themselves to help with symptoms when they have a cold. I think this will save me and my family money by directing us straight to the OTC medicines that will help the most and avoid the ones that are more expensive and very cleverly marketed.

Jennifer says

"In fact, you could create an artificial cold with no cold virus at all, says Gwaltney, just the cocktail of ingredients normally produced by the body in response to a virus. The recipe would include a big squeeze of proinflammatory cytokines to rev up the immune system, among them a smidgeon of kinins to kindle sore throat, congestion, and runny nose; a pinch of prostaglandins to trigger cough; a hint of histamine to stimulate sneezing; and finally, for good measure, a dash of interleukins to foster lethargy."

Kevin says

I give this book 3.5 stars. Ah-Choo! Is a pretty decent book about the common cold. It's written by a journalist, and I might have preferred someone with a little more rigorous approach to the topic, but it was pretty good. One of the big things I got out of it was that the common cold is actually caused by at least 200 different viruses. For certain types of cold viruses (like rhinoviruses, which are about 40% of colds (11)), little is contained in saliva. They are mostly transmitted by way of you touching something and then touching your eyes or nose. (23) Because of this, a good way to keep well is by washing your hands frequently, and for at least 15 seconds (145). One thing that was interesting is that the cold is mostly an immune response of inflammation, but it's not really harming your cells. It's annoying, but it's not destroying an internal organ or anything. For some people, especially those with asthma, it can develop into something greater and be of more concern. (103)

She talks about various ways of dealing with colds, but many of them either don't do anything, or there isn't really evidence one way or the other. It sounded like there was some potential benefit from ginseng. (131) With many herbal remedies, it can be hard to know what exactly it is you're buying, though. She notes that some studies have not found the herb that people thought they were buying in capsules that were supposed to contain that herb. Vitamins like C and D had some impact on certain types of people, but it did not sound like there was a lot of conclusive evidence one way or the other. Two of the biggest things that you could do were to take a placebo or to have someone be caring toward you. Besides those things, she noted that an anti-inflammatory and a first-generation antihistamine work well. Additionally, pseudoephedrine works as a decongestant. Many cough suppressants and other decongestants don't really help that much. Additionally, antibiotics aren't helpful against viruses. It's a lot of common sense, and they are conclusions that I've come to realize along the way, but it was just reassuring that I'm basically doing the right stuff. I think she underplays the role of proper nutrition in the book. She doesn't see the value in certain vitamins and nutrients, and only briefly mentions that many people are lacking in vitamin D, especially in the winter when colds are prevalent.

I enjoyed the stories about various testing of different remedies. Some were of people kept in hospitals for a week, while others were about testing at the Common Cold Unit in the UK. I also liked the reminders about what some of the dirtiest things we have around are, and how our desk, keyboard, and mouse are often much more filthy than our toilet seats.

Overall, I didn't learn a ton from this book, but I found the stories and the background to be interesting. I thought her conclusions were a little weak sometimes, and based on reviews of literature that could have been a little more rigorous, but most of what she said seemed to agree with what I had heard previously. It was more of a collection of good reminders rather than a lot of new information.

J.M. says

not bad, but didn't hold my interest like I hoped it would.

Lea says

This book is informative & fun, very similar to books by Mary Roach. I would have loved to give it four

stars, rather than three, but there was a sense of playfulness that was missing. I wanted more from the author's first hand perspective, more occasions of her actually becoming part of the story, such as her becoming a cold research test subject, as she did in the beginning of the book. All the same, I did enjoy it, & would definitely recommend it to fans of science or medical books.

Shawna says

several interesting facts about colds and a few about asthma. I can't believe it would make some people feel sick to read/listen to it.

Jonna Higgins-Freese says

As is unfortunately often the case in an era when it's hard to make money in publishing, I thought this book was about two drafts from being finished. A skilled editor could have helped the author narrow her scope/define her subject appropriately, or at least explain the choices she made -- lumping influenza and RSV with the common cold struck me as introducing a range of subjects so broad as to make any statements difficult to make.

In addition, Ackerman seemed to struggle with the basic task of science writing -- to make research results clear and comprehensible to the lay reader. First she seemed to argue that colds were highly transmissible, then that they weren't, etc. I think the truth is that the situation is nuanced, but she didn't marshal and present the evidence in a way that made that clear; instead it was just a mishmash.

In the end, I did learn a few interesting things (that susceptibility to colds varies widely among people, for instance -- but not in ways most of us can do much about, except to get more sleep).

Karina Dulin says

An engaging read on a very interesting and relevant topic. Cites lots of academic studies, which I couldn't keep track of, but draws solid conclusions from all the research and semi-scientific information.

Lasdelanogmail.Com says

I did not think anyone could make reading about the common cold fun and informative but Jennifer Ackerman succeeds with flying colors. A great read!
