
A Parent's Guide to The Common Cold

Over 200 different viruses can cause colds, so it is not surprising that children get cold's frequently. Here in New England the average child gets 8 to 10 colds per year, mostly in the winter. Since the average cold causes symptoms for about two weeks (from the onset of the sore throat to the end of the lingering cough), it is true when a parent complains "My child had been sick all winter!" After all, 10 colds times two weeks equals 20 weeks, and 20 weeks is "all winter"!

What is a cold?

A cold is a viral infection of the nasal passages and throat that causes a runny nose, sneezing, a sore throat, and a cough. Coughing can be useful; it helps clear out secretions. Many children with colds have a fever (usually less than 102 degrees F) and feel achy and tired the first few days. Some children may sound hoarse and have a headache, eye irritation, a little diarrhea, and a poor appetite. Many infants with colds have trouble sleeping and feeding because of stuffy noses.

Colds have a typical pattern. During the first few days children have a runny nose, sore throat, mild fever and may feel ill. Later on, they usually feel better, and the nasal discharge becomes thicker and yellow or green. The cough often continues for a week or more, especially at night.

It has been shown that air pollution increases the number of colds: children living in homes heated with wood stoves or homes where the parents smoke will have more colds. Children attending day care have up to 50% more colds than children who remain home because of increased exposure to viruses. Now before we send all the working parents on a massive guilt trip, be reassured that children in day care settings tend to be healthier and have less school absences in kindergarten and first grade. They caught their colds and developed their immunity early.

What about complications?

Most children recover from viruses without any complications. The three most common complications are ear infections, sinus infections, and pneumonia. With all three the child will have the early fever of a cold and progress to the thick nasal discharge. However, instead of continuing to have a cough and gradual improvement, some children develop more fever, begin vomiting, and generally act much sicker. That is when we need to see the child. A child with an ear infection will often pull on the ear, become very cranky, and may begin vomiting. Children with sinus infections usually appear quite ill. Most are over two years of age, have a high fever and complain of a bad headache. Pneumonia is a rare complication. Children with pneumonia usually have a fever over 102 degrees F and have rapid, labored, breathing. Breathing is rapid when the child takes 50 breaths per minute; it is labored when you can see the chest moving up and down and you can see "sinking in" between the ribs with each breath. All three of these complications can be diagnosed in the office and usually respond quickly to antibiotics and children rarely require hospitalization.

When should I call?

Call us immediately, anytime (1) your child has a fever over 104 degrees F, (2) your infant under three months of age has a fever over 100.5 degrees, (3) your child is having difficulty breathing even after you have cleared the nose and kept him or her upright, or (4) your child is so irritable that he or she cannot be comforted or is very lethargic.

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Call in the morning for an appointment for an appointment if your child has (1) an earache or a bad headache, (2) yellow discharge from the eyes, (3) a fever lasting more than four days, (4) raw, infected skin under the nostrils, or (5) noticeable wheezing.

How should I treat my child's cold?

If children are very tired, have a fever, or feel ill, they will often "slow down" by themselves. Bed rest is not usually necessary and it is more work for the parent than it is worth. Older children who feel well should be allowed to go to school unless the symptoms interfere with school work. Younger children in day care should probably stay home for the first two days, when they are most ill. Give lots of fluids to loosen secretions, which will help the cough. Do not force your child to eat solids if he/she doesn't want to eat. Fluids are all children really need during a cold, and forcing solids will often lead to vomiting.

For infants a stuffy nose can make it difficult to suck. Salt water nose drops can easily be made at home: dissolve ¼ tsp salt in one cup water. A few drops into each nostril will loosen the nasal secretions and often make baby sneeze, which clears the airway. If they don't sneeze and clear the nose an infant bulb syringe can be used to gently remove the mucus. This should not be done more than two or three times a day, however, as it can cause irritation and only complicate the problem. Elevating the head of the bed will often make it easier for infants and young children to breathe.

Using a cool-mist humidifier in the room may be beneficial, because this helps loosen the secretions and makes it easier to breathe. Do not use a hot steam vaporizer as these can cause scalding burns! Additionally, it is unnecessary to add medication to the humidifiers.

What about fever?

A fever is rarely harmful to a child. It is a sign that the immune system is working. Instead of treating the numbers on the thermometer, treat the child. Do not awaken a sleeping child for *acetaminophen* (Tylenol), regardless of how hot he or she feels. Sleep is better medicine than *acetaminophen*. If the child is over three months of age, feverish and uncomfortable, acetaminophen can help make him or her be more comfortable. Remember, *acetaminophen* only lasts for 3 to 4 hours and will have to be repeated. Do not use aspirin because of the possible relationship between viruses, aspirin and Reyes syndrome.

About Cold Medicines

There are literally hundreds of cold remedies available, which really proves that none of them are really effective in preventing or curing a cold. There is no medication which will shorten the duration of a cold. Rest, extra fluids, and acetaminophen for the achy feeling are the most effective treatments. Cold remedies for infants under 6 months of age are not recommended because of numerous side effects. Older children, especially those with accompanying allergies are sometimes helped by antihistamines, such as *brompheniramine* and *phenylephrine* (Dimetapp). Decongestants, such as *pseudoephedrine* (Sudafed) often make children "hyper" and are not worth it! Cough syrups, like *dextromethorphan* and *guaifenesin* (Robitussin DM or Vicks formula 44) for children have cough suppressant which help children sleep. Some medications that do not help a cold are vitamins, chest rubs, camphor, or antibiotics.