

When Your Child Has A Cold

For children 6 months and older

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Colds are extremely common. Most children get **3 to 8 colds every year**. Most colds are mild illnesses. But they cause a lot of inconvenience and discomfort for the child and the parents.

Symptoms

These are normal, common symptoms that people get when they have a cold:

- Runny nose
- Clear, yellow or green nasal discharge (The color has nothing to do with the type of infection)
- Sneezing
- Nasal congestion
- Cough
- Low grade fever (100-101 F)
- Headache
- Sore throat
- Ear pressure or pain (This comes from the ear drainage being blocked and does not always mean the ears are infected.)

Children who have colds usually eat and play less than usual. They are often more fussy and irritable than usual.

Fevers

It's **normal** for children to have fevers when they have colds. Fever is just a sign that the body is fighting an infection. Fever is **not harmful**. Fever **never** damages the brain or other organs. Therefore, there is no reason to use aggressive techniques such as a cold-water bath or alcohol bath when your child has a fever. Instead, just make your child comfortable. If your child says he or she feels hot, it means the fever is coming down. You can remove extra covers or clothing so your child feels comfortable but not cold. As the fever comes down, you may need to put them back so your child doesn't feel too cold.

Acetaminophen (Tylenol) and ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) can help your child feel better when he or she has fever or pain. These medicines do not treat runny nose, cough or sneezing at all.

Keeping your child comfortable

No treatment can make a cold go away faster. But you can do some things to help make your child more comfortable while he or she has a cold.

- If your child's nose is very red from blowing it often, try extra-soft tissues with lotion in them. These are much softer than regular tissues and feel better on a painful nose.
- Use water or saline drops to help loosen and remove mucus in the nose. This can help even in children who are old enough to blow their noses. Don't use other nasal sprays such as Afrin. These only help for one or two days, and then they can make the congestion worse.
- Hard candies or cough drops help soothe a sore throat and reduce a cough in children 4 years or older.
- Children from 1 to 4 years can take 1/2 to 1 teaspoon of corn syrup instead of cough drops or hard candies. Don't give corn syrup to children under 1 year old.
- Warm liquids such as juice, chicken broth or soup are also very soothing.
- Don't let anyone smoke in the house, the car, or around your child. Smoke is extremely irritating to the nose, mouth, throat and lungs. It's even more irritating when those parts are already inflamed from the cold. The best solution is to quit smoking completely. Ask your doctor if you need help.
- Humidifiers spray a tiny mist of water droplets into the air. Humid air feels better than dry air when it goes over the inflamed lining of the mouth, nose and throat. The water in the air also helps make the mucus thinner so it comes out more easily. Humidifiers are especially good for coughs. Use the "cool

mist" type with plain water and no medicines added. Do not use a steam vaporizer. The steam is extremely hot and can cause severe burns if your child touches it.

- If you don't have a humidifier, you can run a hot shower to steam up the bathroom, then sit with your child in the steamy bathroom.
- VapoRub is a cream you rub on the chest in children 2 years or older. It releases vapor which help soothe the lining of the nose and throat. One application will last for several hours.

Staying well hydrated

Most children eat less when they are sick. It's important for them to drink lots of fluids so they don't get dehydrated. These things can help tell you that your child is getting enough fluid:

- Your child urinates (pees) several times a day
- Your child's mouth is moist on the inside
- Your child's eyes are moist and have tears when he or she cries

Medicines

A type of germ called a **virus** causes colds. There are over 200 different viruses that cause colds! Antibiotics have **no effect at all** on viruses. You should never treat a cold with antibiotics.

Dozens of medicines claim to treat cold **symptoms**. These only treat the symptoms. They don't make the cold go away. They can cause side effects such as sleepiness, fast heart rate or increased activity. Ask your doctor if a cold medicine is appropriate for your child.

Cold medicines are very confusing. There are many different brands, and many products with similar names. Most of them contain mixtures of several drugs. Do not give more than one medicine, unless your doctor tells you to. Otherwise, you might give your child a double dose of some drugs. Do not give your child aspirin - not even "baby" aspirin. Aspirin is only for adults!

Getting Better

Parents often feel frustrated that their child "isn't getting any better." Getting better takes time:

- Fever usually goes away in **2-3 days**
- The runny or stuffy nose usually lasts about **a week**
- The cough may last another **2-3 weeks**.

Preventing the spread of colds

Colds are spread mainly by touching things that other people with colds have touched. So be sure to wash your hands often. Plain soap and water works fine. Dry your hands with paper towels instead of a shared cloth towel. Hand sanitizer gels (such as Purell) also work well, and you can carry them around with you. Don't share plates, eating utensils or toothbrushes. Clean surfaces such as countertops with any disinfectant cleaner. Try to keep sick kids away from healthy people.

There is not good evidence that Vitamin C, Echinacea or zinc can prevent or shorten colds.

When to call the doctor's office

You should call your doctor's office if you have questions or concerns. Be sure to call if your child:

- Is wheezing
- Seems very sick or lethargic
- Has a lot of vomiting and/or diarrhea
- Appears dehydrated
- Can't take anything by mouth
- Has a very sore throat
- Has a fever for more than 3 days
- Has a cough for more than 3 weeks

