

# Colds in Children

---

## What causes a cold?

Colds (or upper respiratory infections) are illnesses caused by several different **viruses**. Viruses are extremely small infectious organisms (much smaller than bacteria). A sneeze or a cough may spread a virus from one person to another. The virus may also spread if a child touches something (such as a toy) that has the virus on it and then touches her eyes, mouth or nose.

## What are the some signs and symptoms of a cold?

- Runny nose (first, a clear discharge, later, it is thicker, often colored)
- Sneezing
- Fever (often 101-102 degrees Fahrenheit or 38.3-38.9 degrees Celsius)
- Low interest in eating and/or drinking
- Sore throat
- Cough
- Fussiness or low energy
- Slightly swollen glands in the neck and underarms

## How long do the symptoms last?

If your child has a typical cold (without complications), the symptoms usually resolve after **7-10 days**. Cough may last longer, often 14 days.

## What are the treatments for a cold?

- The body will cure itself of the cold virus with time. **Antibiotics have no effect on viruses**. The best thing you can do is make your child comfortable and wait for her body's immune system to fight the virus.

- Make sure your child gets **extra rest** and **drinks increased amounts of fluids**.
- If your child has a fever and is uncomfortable, you can give her **acetaminophen** or **ibuprofen**. **Do not give Ibuprofen** to children 6 months of age or younger. Ask your doctor for a dose and frequency based on your child's weight.
- For nasal congestion, clear the nose with **saline (salt water) nose drops or spray**. Place two to three drops in each nostril for children older than age 1 and one drop per nostril for children less than one year old.
- You may suction the nose with a **suction bulb or NoseFrida device** every few hours or before feeding and bedtime in a child too young to blow his nose.
- Placing a **cool-mist humidifier** (vaporizer) in your child's room also will help keep nasal secretions thin. Be sure to clean and dry the humidifier thoroughly each day to prevent bacterial or mold contamination.
- Protect the skin around stuffy noses with **petroleum jelly or lanolin ointment**.
- You can give children **older than 1 year**, a spoonful of honey to help with their cough 2-3 times a day.

### **Should I give my child over-the-counter cold and cough medications?**

**No. Do not give** over-the-counter cough and cold medications **to children younger than six years**. Using these medications in children is **dangerous** for three reasons:

1. The safe dose of the ingredients used in most cold medicines in children has not been studied.
2. Studies have not shown much improvement in symptoms of children taking cold medicines.
3. There have been rare deaths in children taking cold medicines.

### **Is it normal for my child to get multiple colds each year?**

Yes, your child probably will have more colds than any other illness, which can

be frustrating to some parents In the first few years of life, most children have eight to ten colds per year. And if your child is in child-care, or if there are older school-age children in your house, she may have even more. **To prevent cold viruses from spreading, wash hands often and teach children to cover their cough with their elbow.**

### **When do I need to call my child's doctor?**

Call the doctor if your child has any of the following:

- Fever lasting more than three days.
- Cough lasting more than 14 days.
- Widening (flaring) nostrils with each breath.
- Skin above or below the ribs sucks in with each breath (retractions).
- Breathing that is fast or hard (distressed).
- Pain that does not respond to pain medication.
- Ear pain that is severe or lasting more than a day.
- Inability to drink or make urine like usual
- Sleepiness
- Irritability
- Worsening cold or cold that does not improve after 10 days.

If your baby is **younger than 3 months** of age, **contact your pediatrician at the first signs of illness.**

Disclaimer: This document contains information and/or instructional materials developed by the University of Michigan Health System (UMHS) for the typical patient with your condition. It may include links to online content that was not created by UMHS and for which UMHS does not assume responsibility. It does not replace medical advice from your health care provider because your experience may differ from that of the typical patient. Talk to your health care provider if you have any questions about this document, your condition or your treatment plan.

Authors: Margeaux Reizian, MD; Stephanie Booms, MD, Ashley DeHudy, MD  
Reviewer: Alison Lea Dickson, MD

Patient Education by [University of Michigan Health System](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License](#). Last Revised 03/2015