

# Colds

## Patient and Family Education

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**This teaching sheet contains general information only. Talk with your child's doctor or a member of your child's healthcare team about specific care of your child.**

### What is a cold?

A cold is an infection of the nose, throat, sinuses and upper airways. Colds are caused by a virus so it is easy to pass a cold from one person to another. A child may have as many as 6 or more colds a year.

Since a virus causes a cold, there is no medicine that can cure a cold. Antibiotics do not help and could do harm. A cold usually goes away on its own in 7 to 10 days. A cough may last 2 to 3 weeks.

### What are the possible symptoms?

Your child may have one or more of these:

- Runny nose with congestion (nose drainage may be clear, yellow or green colored)
- Sneezing
- Watery eyes
- Tiredness
- Body aches and pains
- Sore throat
- Cough or hoarse voice
- Fever

### Call your child's doctor if your child has not yet been checked by a doctor for fever and:

- Is less than 3 months of age and has a fever of 100.4 F (38 C) or more rectally. Even a slight fever in a young baby can be a sign of serious illness.
- Is between 3 and 24 months of age and has a fever of 102.2 F (39C) or more rectally.

### What can I do for my child?

There are some things you can do for your child to make him feel better until the cold is gone:

- Give lots of cool, clear liquids to keep the throat moist and so that he does not get dehydrated (dried out). Do not try to force your child to eat. It is normal to have less appetite with a cold.
- Give acetaminophen (Tylenol or less costly brand) or ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil or less costly store brand) for fever or pain if advised by your doctor. Follow the directions on the box carefully or ask your child's doctor how much medicine to give.

#### **DO NOT:**

- Give your child more than 5 doses of acetaminophen in a 24-hour period.
- Give acetaminophen to babies younger than 3 months old without talking with your child's doctor.
- Give ibuprofen to babies younger than 6 months old without talking with your child's doctor.
- Give acetaminophen and ibuprofen together.
- Alternate these medicines.

**In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.**

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- Never give Aspirin to a child under age 18 who has a cold or flu. It could cause a rare but serious condition called Reye's Syndrome.
- Place a cool mist humidifier by your child's room or play area.
  - Hot steam vaporizers are not safe. They may burn your child.
  - Change the water, and clean the humidifier each day.
  - Follow the cleaning instructions that came with the machine, so it does not grow germs and mold.
- Treat your baby's stuffy nose with saltwater (saline) drops and a bulb syringe. Avoid cigarette smoke and odor around your child.
- Coughing helps clear mucus from the chest and lungs. Most children will not spit out the mucus but will swallow it into their stomachs. This is not a problem.
- Give cough and cold medicines only as advised by your child's doctor. This includes both prescription and over-the-counter medicines.
  - The American Academy of Pediatrics does not recommend giving any over-the-counter medicines to children under 6 years of age.
  - Talk with your child's doctor before giving any of these medicines.
- You can give 1 teaspoon of honey at bedtime to children older than 12 months of age to calm their cough. You may repeat the dose 1 time during the night.

### How can I help prevent colds from spreading?

Drafts and air conditioning do not cause colds. There is no way to prevent colds, but these things can help:

- Avoid crowded places, especially during cold and flu season.
- Hand hygiene is the most important thing you can do to help prevent the spread of germs. You may use:
  - Soap and water to wash your hands well for 20 seconds. Rinse and dry them well, too.
  - An alcohol hand cleaner if your hands do not have any visible dirt or grime on them.
- Teach your child to cover his mouth and nose with a tissue when he coughs or sneezes.
  - Put the used tissue in the trash.
  - If he cannot use a tissue, teach him to cough or sneeze into his upper sleeve or elbow, not his hands.

### When can my child return to daycare or school?

Keep your child home until he:

- Feels better.
- Has no fever without using medicines for 24 hours.

### When should I call the doctor?

Call 911 or your local ambulance service right away if your child:

- Is so tired and weak that he hardly responds to you.
- Is working very hard to breathe or finds it hard to take a breath. Some signs of breathing problems may include:
  - Grunts when he breathes
  - Has chest retractions (skin pulling in around the ribs and chest when breathing)
  - Has a blue or dark purple color to the nail beds, lips or gums

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- Stops breathing for more than 10 seconds
- Cannot speak while trying to breathe
- Has any breathing problem that needs care **right away**.

### **Call your child's doctor if your child:**

- Is unable to breathe and suck at the same time or chokes when he sucks.
- Does not smile or show interest in play for at least a few minutes during a 4-hour period.
- Wheezes or breathes harder than he did when he was seen by the doctor.
- Has a tight feeling in the chest or chest pain.
- Cannot be calmed for at least a few minutes each hour using methods that usually work for your child, such as holding, rocking, pacifiers or soothing talk.
- Pulls at his ears or shows signs of ear pain.
- Is not feeling better or has a feeling of tiredness and weakness after 3 days.
- Shows signs of dehydration (drying out):
  - No urine for more than 6 hours in a baby younger than 1 year old
  - No urine in more than 8 hours in a child older than 1 year old
  - No tears when crying
  - Sunken eyes
  - Dry lips and mouth
- Has bloody saliva or mucus.
- Has prolonged or worsening cough or other symptoms for more than 2 weeks.

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Also, call if you have any questions or concerns about how your child looks or feels.

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