

Ah Choo! What to Do: Treating the Common Cold

Your son doesn't feel so good. His nose is running, his throat is sore, his head hurts. He looks like a limp rag lying on the sofa. He has a cold.

Although the common cold is usually a mild illness, it is a leading cause of visits to the pediatrician and school absenteeism. While the average adult catches two to four colds a year, the average child can suffer anywhere from six to 10 a year. Weaker immune systems and close contact with other children in school and day care centers increase the odds of your little one sniffing and sneezing.

What to expect when the cold arrives

While the infection is mild, the symptoms bring misery. A cold can last from one to two weeks, bringing with it fever, fatigue, coughing, sneezing, runny nose, sore throat, headaches and muscle aches.

How your child catches colds

Regardless of what all those "old wives" told you, you cannot catch a cold by going out in the rain without an umbrella, leaving your coat unbuttoned in the cold, or getting your feet wet in the snow. Colds are caused by viruses and are spread by contact with infected people.

The infection can enter the body through the eyes, nose, or mouth, and can spread by a cough, sneeze, or direct contact with an infected person, or object that person has touched.

Reduce your child's chance of catching a cold

To prevent the spread of germs to others, your child should be taught to:

- Cover his mouth and nose when sneezing and coughing, preferably using a disposable tissue
- Wash hands frequently, especially after sneezing and coughing, and before touching food
- Avoid touching her nose, eyes or mouth

Because some of the viruses that cause colds can survive up to three hours outside the nasal passages on inanimate objects, cleaning surfaces with a virus-killing disinfectant might help prevent spread of infection.

Cold comfort

There is very little that can be done to treat a cold; antibiotics do not work on viruses. Treatment is aimed at making the child comfortable until the illness passes.

To help your child feel better, give her plenty of fluids, let her rest, feed her chicken soup (that's right - chicken soup!) and other warm liquids, and treat her fever with acetaminophen (such as Tylenol). The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends children and teenagers never be given aspirin or any medications containing aspirin when they have any viral illness, as it has been linked to the development of Reye's syndrome, a rare but serious illness that can lead to permanent brain damage or death.

When a cold is something more

So, when is a cold not a cold? Call the doctor if your child exhibits any of the following symptoms:

- Earache, high fever, significantly swollen glands, severe facial pain in the sinuses, and a cough that produces mucus (may indicate a complication or more serious illness)
- Fever of or over 102 degrees
- Unusually fussy and cranky, or cries a lot
- Skin rash, especially if accompanied by a fever
- Difficulty breathing or very fast breathing
- Coughing almost non-stop
- Vomiting
- Stomach pain
- Very bad headache
- Difficulty swallowing
- Pain with urination (may indicate a urinary tract infection)
- A cold that lasts for more than 14 days

Reviewed by: [Patrick S. Pasquariello Jr., MD](#)

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