The Common Cold and Your Child

A cold is an infection of the upper airway (nose, throat, and sinuses) caused by a virus. Close to 200 viruses exist, so healthy children may have up to 15 colds a year. Most children under age five have 6-8 colds per year. Cold symptoms can last seven to fourteen days.

A cold virus is spread from a sick person to others by sneezing or coughing or contact with the hands or mouth. A cold virus can live on toys, phones, door knobs, tables, and other objects for up to three hours and transfer to a child's hands. The virus gets on a child's hands and is transferred to the nose, mouth, or eyes by normal face touching habits. Colds are not caused by being exposed to cold air or wind. Colds are more common in winter because people stay indoors and have more contact with each other.

What are the Signs and Symptoms of a Cold?

- Sneezing
- Cough
- Red eyes
- Irritability
- Sore throat
- Slightly swollen glands (lymph nodes)
- Runny nose (clear at first, then thicker and slightly colored)
- Decreased appetite
- Slight fever (100° – 102° F), most often in the evening

When should I call? Call if your child has any of the signs and symptoms listed below.

- Very sleepy or looks very ill.
- Is younger than 2-3 months of age and has a fever.
- For children over 3 months of age if the temperature is 104° F or higher.
- Has had a temperature of 101° F or more for 72 hours (3 days) or longer.
- Breathing is fast, labored, or difficult.
- A cough that has lasted longer than two weeks.
- Has yellow drainage from the eyes.
- A sore throat without a runny nose or cough.
- Ear or sinus pain.
- Looks dehydrated
  - Dry lips or mouth
  - Decreased urination (less than 3 times in 24 hours)
Infants are more prone to dehydration because of their small size and because it is hard for them to eat with a stuffy nose.

**How to Prevent the Common Cold**

Although you will not be able to prevent your child from catching colds, it is best to keep your child away from people who are ill, especially if your baby is younger than three months old. Keep your young baby away from shopping centers, day care settings, churches and other places where there may be large numbers of people who may be ill.

Other tips that may help prevent the spread of a cold virus.

- Wash your hands and your child’s hands often.
- Keep your child’s hands away from the nose and mouth.
- Dispose of used facial tissues right away.
- Teach your child to cover the nose and mouth when coughing and sneezing.
- Use a cool mist humidifier in your child's room to prevent drying of mucous membranes. When mucous membranes become dry, they are more at risk for infection.
- Be careful if using large doses of vitamin C. It has not been shown to prevent or shorten colds and may cause diarrhea.

**How to Treat the Common Cold**

There is no cure for colds. Antibiotics have no effect because they work against bacteria not viruses. There are some things you can do that will help your child to feel better.

- Make sure your child gets plenty of rest.
- Make sure your child gets plenty of fluids. Don't worry if your child doesn't want to eat solids.
- Use a cool mist humidifier in your child's room. Do not use warm or hot mist as it can cause burns and scalds in children. Clean the humidifier weekly with a mixture of bleach and water.
- Use a nasal bulb syringe for infants to clear the nose of mucus.
- If your child's nose is stuffed up but not dripping, use warm plain water or saline drops in the nose before using the bulb syringe. Saline drops can be made by adding 1/4 teaspoon salt to 8 ounces warm water. Use an eye dropper or clean cotton ball to drip 2-4 drops into your child’s nostrils. Let the drops stay in the nose for one minute and then use the bulb syringe. Repeat this process if needed. This is helpful in small babies before they eat because they breathe through their noses. When noses are stuffed up, it becomes hard for small babies to breathe while they are sucking and drinking. This is also a good thing to do before your child goes to sleep. Fresh saline drops should be made daily.
Are Over the Counter Medicines Safe For my Child?

- The FDA strongly advises that over-the-counter (OTC) cough and cold products should not be used for infants and children under 6 years of age. Studies have shown cough and cold products do not work well for children under six years of age, and may pose serious health risks. They also can be the cause of accidental poisoning in young children because they are colored and taste good.

- If your child has discomfort from fever, acetaminophen (Tylenol®) or Ibuprofen may be given. Do not give your child aspirin. If you decide to give your older child a cold medicine, be sure to read the label well. If the cold medicine contains acetaminophen, do not give your child extra Tylenol®. Follow all dose guidelines with care; check with your clinic if unsure about doses.