

The Common Cold

Bringing sniffles and sneezes and perhaps a sore throat and annoying cough, the common cold catches all of us from time to time.

With kids getting as many as eight colds per year or more, this contagious viral infection of the upper respiratory tract is the most common infectious disease in the United States and the No. 1 reason kids visit the doctor and stay home from school.

Most colds are caused by rhinoviruses that are in invisible droplets in the air we breathe or on things we touch. More than 100 different rhinoviruses can infiltrate the protective lining of the nose and throat, triggering an immune system reaction that can cause a throat sore and headache, and make it hard to breathe through the nose.

*Despite what old wives' tales may have you believe, not wearing a jacket or sweater when it's chilly, sitting or sleeping in a draft, and going outside while your hair's wet **do not** cause colds.*

Colds are not serious. But, be aware that between 5 and 10% of children develop a bacterial complication, such as an ear infection or sinus infection.

Because there are so many viruses that cause colds, it's normal for healthy children to get at least 6 colds a year. With every new cold, your child's body builds up immunity to that virus. This is the good news!!

Most parents know when their child has a cold, often because they have it too or other children in child care or school have it. You don't need to call or see your child's doctor for common colds unless your child develops a possible complication (such as an earache).

The average cold lasts about 2 weeks and we don't have any medicine to make it go away sooner.

Signs and Symptoms

The first symptoms of a cold are often a tickle in the throat, a runny or stuffy nose, and sneezing. Kids with colds may also have a sore throat, cough, headache, mild fever, fatigue, muscle aches, and loss of appetite. Nasal discharge may change from **watery to thick yellow or green**. The thick-yellow-green discharge does not necessarily mean that your child has a "sinus infection" and needs antibiotics.

Colds cause nasal discharge, nasal congestion, sinus congestion, ear congestion, sore throats, hoarse voice, coughs, croup, and red, watery eyes. When you combine all these symptoms, colds are the most common reason for calls to the doctor.

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Cold symptoms are also the number one reason for office and ER visits. Hopefully, this information will save you time and money and help you avoid some unnecessary trips to the doctor. **You can be reassured the following are normal cold symptoms and children with these symptoms don't need to be seen:**

- Fever up to 3 days
- Sore throat up to 5 days (with other cold symptoms)
- Nasal discharge and congestion up to 2 weeks
- Coughs up to 3 weeks

Symptoms of Secondary Bacterial Infections

If your child has any of the following symptoms, they might be in the 5 to 10% of children who have complications of the common cold. If your child has any of the following, seek out medical care for your child.

- Earache or ear discharge
- Sinus pain not relieved by nasal washes
- Difficulty breathing or rapid breathing
- Fever present over 3 days
- Fever that goes away for 24 hours and then returns
- Sore throat present over 5 days
- Nasal discharge present over 2 weeks
- Cough present over 3 weeks

Expected Course of a Cold

- Fever should last 2-3 days
- Nasal discharge can last 7-14 days
- Cough can linger for up to 2-3 weeks

Return to School

Your child can return to child care or school after the fever is gone and your child feels well enough to participate in normal activities. For practical purposes, the spread of colds cannot be prevented.

My child seems to get a lot of colds. Is this normal?

Your child probably will have more colds, or upper respiratory infections, than any other illness. **In the first two years of life alone, most youngsters have eight to ten colds.** And if your child is in child care, or if there are older school-age children in your house, she may have even more, since colds spread easily among children who are in close contact with one another. That's the bad news, but there is some good news, too: Most colds go away by themselves and do not lead to anything worse

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Home Care Advice for Colds

“Time cures all”. That may not always be true, but in the case of the common cold, it’s pretty close. The average cold lasts about 2 weeks and we don’t have any medicine to make it go away sooner. However, we have good ways to relieve many of the symptoms. With most colds, the initial symptom is a runny nose, followed in 3 or 4 days by a congested nose. The treatment for each is different.

*For a Runny Nose With Profuse Discharge: **Blow or Suction the Nose***

- The nasal mucus and discharge is washing viruses and bacteria out of the nose and sinuses. Blowing the nose is all that's needed. For younger children, gently suction the nose with a suction bulb.
- Apply petroleum jelly to the nasal openings to protect them from irritation (cleanse the skin first).
- **Nasal Washes To Open a Blocked Nose:**
Use saline nose drops or spray to loosen up the dried mucus. If not available, can use warm tap water. Do the nasal washes whenever your child can’t breathe through the nose.

STEP 1: Instill 3 drops per nostril. (Age under 1 year, use 1 drop and do one side at a time)

STEP 2: Blow (or suction) each nostril separately, while closing off the other nostril. Then do other side.

STEP 3: Repeat nose drops and blowing (or suctioning) until the discharge is clear.

- Another option is to use a warm shower to loosen mucus. Breathe in the moist air, then blow each nostril.
- For young children, you can also use a wet cotton swab to remove sticky mucus.

Coughing

- **AGE 3 months to 1 year:** Give warm clear fluids (e.g., water or apple juice) to treat the cough. Give 1-3 teaspoons four times per day when coughing. Avoid honey until 1 year old.
- **AGE 1 year and older:** Use ½ to 1 teaspoon honey as needed as a homemade cough medicine. It can thin the secretions and loosen the cough.
- **AGE 6 years and older:** Use cough drops to coat the irritated throat. If these are not available, you can use hard candy.
- Encourage your child to drink adequate fluids to prevent dehydration. This will also thin out the nasal secretions and loosen the phlegm in the airway.
- If the air is dry, use a humidifier. Dry air makes coughs worse.
- Avoid tobacco smoke. Active or passive smoking makes coughs much worse.
- For coughing spasms, expose to warm mist, such as that found in a foggy bathroom.

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Fluids

- Encourage your child to drink adequate fluids to prevent dehydration. This will also thin out the nasal secretions and loosen any phlegm in the lungs.

Use a humidifier

- If the air in your home is dry, use a humidifier. This will help your child sleep better as well.

Medicines for Colds:

- **Cold medicines.** Before 4 years, never use any cough or cold medicine. They are not safe for this age and are not approved by the FDA.
- **Antihistamines** are not helpful, unless your child also has nasal allergies.
- **Decongestants.** Examples: Pseudoephedrine or Phenylephrine. You may be tempted to give your child decongestants to try and ease the cold symptoms. The fact is there is no evidence to support that they actually work. In fact, decongestants can cause hallucinations, irritability, and irregular heartbeats in infants.
- **Antibiotics.** Antibiotics are not helpful, unless your child develops an ear or sinus infection.

Fever or Pain

- Use acetaminophen (e.g., Tylenol) or ibuprofen for muscle aches, headaches, or fever above 102° F.

Sore Throat

- Use warm chicken broth if over 1 year old and suck on hard candy if over 6 years old.
- Administer acetaminophen or ibuprofen.

See your doctor for the following:

Earache or cloudy discharge from ear canal
Fever lasts over 3 days
Any fever occurs if under 12 weeks old
Fever returns after gone for 24 hours

Nasal discharge lasts over 14 days
Cough lasts over 3 weeks
Sore throat present over 5 days
Your child gets worse – not better – after 3 days

Adapted from www.kidshealth.org and www.healthychildren.org