



Common Colds

Common colds are extremely “common!” Children may catch as many as 8-10 viral infections per year in the first few years of life. Cough, congestion, runny nose, sneezing, and mild fever are typical symptoms of a cold. The common cold is caused by a virus, and it may take 7-10 days to run its course. Coughs may linger for a week or more past that. Viral infections do not respond to antibiotics, but there are several things you can do to help your child feel better during an illness.

Symptomatic care: During a common cold, a child’s mood, appetite, and sleep may be affected. The goal is to provide temporary symptom relief while allowing the child’s body to fight the infection.

- **Nasal saline:** Saline irrigation of the nasal passages can help flush out drainage and mucus. For younger babies, suctioning with a “blue bulb” or a NoseFrida device can help. Older kids and adults may benefit from using a Neti Pot or NeilMed Sinus Rinse.
- **Humidifier:** A cool-mist humidifier can loosen congestion and help a child breathe more comfortably at night. Be sure to clean out the humidifier according to manufacturer’s instructions.
- **Vicks BabyRub:** This is a mild and safe product that has been shown to decrease nighttime cough. It is safe for babies 3 months and older. VapoRub is safe for age 2 years and older.
- **Fever Control:** Fever is a sign that the body is fighting an illness appropriately. High fever makes a child feel uncomfortable, but it is not harmful to the body. Infants less than 2 months of age with a rectal temperature of 100.4 or higher require immediate evaluation in a pediatric emergency room, but for older kids, fever is not usually an urgent matter. Acetaminophen can be given for a child’s comfort, and for kids 6 months and older, ibuprofen is preferred for pain and fever control. Dosing depends on your child’s weight.
- **Honey:** Honey should not be given to children less than 12 months of age, but for older kids, honey or honey-based cough syrups can be given to help with cough.
- **Cough and Cold Medications:** Unless your doctor specifically prescribes a medication, the above measures will be safer and more effective than medicines for your child’s symptom relief. The American Academy of Pediatrics strongly recommends that over-the-counter cough and cold medications not be given to kids younger than 2 years because of the risk of life-threatening side effects. Also, several studies show that cold and cough products don’t work in children younger than 4 years and can have potentially serious side effects.
- **Antibiotics:** As previously mentioned, antibiotics are not necessary for common colds. However, common colds will sometimes lead to secondary bacterial infections such as ear infections, sinus infections, bronchitis, or pneumonia. These are very unlikely to be present in the first few days of an illness. If fever, fussiness, sleep disturbance, and cough seem to be worsening by the 4th or 5th day of a common cold, a secondary infection may be developing. An examination in the office is necessary to make this diagnosis and prescribe appropriate treatment.