

What is a cold?

- Colds are an infection of the upper respiratory tract.
- It is a mild infection but is very common. It is sometimes called "the common cold."

What causes it?

- Colds are caused by a viral infection.
- Your child cannot "catch a cold" by standing out in the rain, not wearing a hat in cold weather, or losing sleep.

Who can get it?

- Children tend to get colds more often than adults do.
- Children in school or day care are more likely to get colds because infections are spread easily in classrooms and closed spaces.
- Children's symptoms tend to be worse than adults' symptoms.
- The cold season in the U.S. starts in August or September and ends around April or May. But, colds can happen any time of the year.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Most children have several colds a year. Symptoms may include:

- Looks sick
- Fever
- Little energy
- Little appetite
- Coughing
- Sneezing
- Runny nose
- Sore throat
- Headache
- Muscle aches
- Colds may lead to an ear infection or pneumonia

Is a cold contagious?

- Yes. Colds are contagious.
- The infection can enter the body through the eyes, nose, or mouth.
- It can spread by a cough or sneeze.
- It can spread by direct contact (if a child wipes her runny nose and then touches another child or even if she touches a toy that another child will play with later).

How is it treated?

Colds cannot be treated with antibiotics. Doctors can do very little to treat a cold. Treatment is aimed at making the child more comfortable. The following suggestions may help:

- Give your child plenty of fluids.
- If she feels tired, have her rest.
- Chicken soup and other warm liquids often help children feel better.
- Put a vaporizer near your child's bed to soothe her symptoms. Change the water daily. Clean it weekly to prevent germs.

- Your child and those around her should wash hands often, especially before eating and preparing food.
- Teach your child to cover her mouth and nose when she sneezes and coughs to prevent the spread of germs. Have her wash her hands after coughing or sneezing.
- Treat your child's fever. **Never give children aspirin without talking to a doctor first.**
- Use acetaminophen (such as Tylenol) for pain and fever relief.
- Children with a cold should avoid smoke. Parents should try not to smoke around their children.

How long does it last?

- Colds usually last 1 or 2 weeks.
- Fever symptoms usually last 1 to 3 days.
- Runny nose and sore throat may last 7 to 10 days.
- Coughing may last 2 to 3 weeks.

Can it be prevented?

- Taking vitamin C has not been shown to prevent colds but it may help symptoms clear up sooner. Talk to your doctor before giving your child vitamins.
- Your child and those around her should wash hands often to help prevent the spread of infection.
- Throw away tissues as soon as they are used.
- When your child has a cold it is especially important to keep bathrooms and the kitchen clean.
- When choosing childcare, look for a place that is clean and has rules about keeping children clean (such as washing hands before snack time).
- As children get older and are exposed to more infections, their bodies become better prepared to fight the infections. As your child gets older, you may notice that she has fewer colds.

When should I call the doctor?

- Call the doctor if your child's cold lasts for more than 14 days.
- Call the doctor if your child has any of the following symptoms:
 - Earache. She may have an ear infection.
 - Fever over 39 degrees C (or 102 degrees F).
 - She is unusually sleepy. Some sleepiness is to be expected with colds but a great amount is cause for concern.
 - She is unusually fussy and cranky or cries a lot.
 - She has a skin rash, especially if she also has a fever.
 - Difficulty breathing or very fast breathing.
 - Coughing almost non-stop.
 - Vomiting.
 - Stomach pain.
 - Very bad headache.
 - She cannot swallow.
 - Pain with urination. She may have a urinary tract infection.

Quick Answers

- Colds are an infection of the upper respiratory tract.
- Colds are caused by a viral infection.
- Children tend to get colds more often than adults do.
- Symptoms can include sore throat, runny nose, coughing, fever, and headache.
- Colds are contagious. They can be spread by coughing, sneezing, and direct contact.

- Colds cannot be treated with antibiotics. Treatment is aimed at making the child more comfortable.
- Colds usually last 1 or 2 weeks.
- Your child and those around her should wash hands often to help prevent the spread of infection.
- Call the doctor if your child has unusual symptoms or if her cold lasts for more than 14 days.

References

- Canadian Pediatric Society. Common Cold. Caring for Kids. 1999 (cited 2002 February 13). URL: <http://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/whensick/CommonCold.htm>
- Columbia University College. Infections of the Upper Respiratory Tract. (cited 2002 February 13). URL: http://cpmcnet.columbia.edu/texts/guide/hmg18_0004.html
- MayoClinic. Colds, coughs, and runny noses. 2001 December 21 (cited 2002 February 13). URL: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/invoke.cfm?id=CC00005>