

COUGHS AND COLDS

The “common cold” is the most frequent sickness of young children. There are over 200 viruses which cause the symptoms of a “cold.” They spread more in colder weather when families cluster indoors and when children are close together in schools and day care centers. Colds spread by contact with infected secretions from other people. Being cold does not cause this illness. The average child gets 6-8 colds per year (See handout on Frequent Illness).

TYPICAL SYMPTOMS

- Clear discharge from the nose, becoming thicker, even yellow green after a few days.
- Mild lethargy and crankiness.
- Decreased appetite.
- Cough may appear later – usually hacking, lasting several days.
- The complete sickness usually runs its course in about 10-14 days although the cough may linger.

COMPLICATIONS

The most common complications affect the ears, sinuses and chest, usually occurring after the first few days. Often there is a “double hump” sickness: the child will seem to improve only to become sicker again. Typical signs of complications are:

- Persistent fever for more than 72 hours or reappearance of fever just when the child seemed to be improving.
- Pain or complaints about the ear, or drainage from the ear.
- Grunting or labored breathing, with a cough that seems heavier and wetter.
- Wheezing or other trouble with breathing.
- Red swollen eyes with thick discharge.
- Repeated vomiting.
- Looking sicker than expected for the degree of fever.
- Illness lasts longer than 10-14 days.

YELLOW OR GREEN NASAL DISCHARGE

Most colds will begin with clear nasal discharge and progress over the first week to thicker colored discharge. The color of the discharge is NOT necessarily a sign of sinus infection. We would suspect a sinus problem if either the discharge persisted beyond 10-14 days or if the change of mucus was accompanied by other signs of worsening (return of fever, intense headache, etc.). See also: *Sinusitis* handout.

PREVENTION

For the cold itself, there is no cure. There is no medicine to prevent it or treat it. You can help prevent colds in your family by careful hand-washing, avoiding persons with colds, keeping your home heat on the cool side, and avoiding air pollution from cigarettes or a wood, coal, or kerosene stove.

TREATMENT

If your child gets a cold, the treatment is primarily aimed at making him more comfortable while his immune system kills the viruses. Your actions can go a long way to relieve the bothersome symptoms of congestion and feeling bad. Some of the most beneficial steps include:

- Maintain a comfortable but cool house temperature (65-67 degrees by day, 60-62 degrees by night)
- Run a clear water vaporizer or humidifier at the bedside, safely away from your child's reach.
- Give plenty of fluids to the child. As long as the appetite is good, allow eating. The child should urinate at least three times per 24 hours. It is not necessary to eliminate milk.
- Suction the nose of an infant/child who cannot blow his nose with a rubber bulb syringe (ear syringe). Having the nose clear before feedings and at bedtime will help considerably.
- A salt-water nasal spray/drop may aid in soothing the lining and in suctioning out the mucus. It can be bought in a pharmacy as Ocean Mist, Saline, NaSal, or Ayr.
- You can make a saline solution yourself by dissolving ¼ teaspoon of table salt in 3 ½ oz. of warm, sterile (boiled) water. One or two drops or a squeeze of the mist in each nostril followed by suctioning will clear the nose.

COUGH MEDICINES

A cough is an important reflex to remove mucus and secretions. It should not be considered alarming or dangerous to the child even though it is bothersome. Cough medicines are not usually of any great value. The vaporizer, ample fluid intake, a spoonful of honey, and chicken soup do more good than drugs. Cough medicines are not used under the age of 4 years and avoided under the age of 6 years.

COLD MEDICINES

Cold medicines (antihistamines and decongestants) are of limited value. They do not shorten the course of the cold, nor do they prevent complications. They should never be used under the age of 4 years and generally avoided under age six years. Side effects include jitteriness, irritability and sedation. Vaporubs may improve sleep.

ANTIBIOTICS

Antibiotics are not helpful for viruses. They cannot kill viruses and will not help the child. Therefore, the child who takes antibiotics for a cold is exposed to all the potential negative side effects of these drugs and absolutely no benefit. In fact, children who take antibiotics for colds may be more difficult to treat if a bacterial infection requiring antibiotics should occur in the future. Thus, we do not use antibiotics for viruses at Hunterdon Pediatric Associates.