

The Common Cold: What Parents Should Know

What Is a Cold?

The common cold is one of the most common illnesses of childhood. Children typically get **6–8 colds per year**, and some children—especially those in daycare or preschool—may get **10 or more**.

One of the most common concerns I hear from parents is, *"My child seems sick all the time."* Because one cold can last **1–2 weeks**, and another may start soon after the first ends, many parents worry that their child is sick continuously. In reality, frequent colds are a normal part of childhood and a sign that the immune system is being exposed to and learning to fight common viruses.

Children are most likely to catch colds during the fall and winter months, but colds can occur year-round.

Colds spread through coughing, sneezing, and hand-to-hand contact. Because colds are caused by viruses, **antibiotics do not help**.

What Symptoms Should I Expect?

Most colds begin with a sore throat and nasal congestion, followed by:

- Runny or stuffy nose
- Cough
- Sneezing
- Fever
- Irritability or poor sleep
- Decreased appetite

Important: Nasal mucus often turns yellow or green during a cold. This is normal and does not automatically mean your child has a bacterial infection.

How Long Do Colds Last?

- Most cold symptoms improve within **7–10 days**
- Nasal congestion may last up to **2 weeks**
- Coughs commonly last **2–3 weeks**

What Helps?

Fluids: Encourage frequent sips of water, breast milk, formula, soup, or other fluids.

Saline & Suction: For infants and young children, saline nose drops or spray followed by gentle suction can help relieve congestion.

Cool-Mist Humidifier: A cool-mist humidifier may help ease congestion and soothe irritated airways.

Honey (Over 1 Year Old): 1 teaspoon of honey before bedtime may help reduce nighttime coughing.

Sore Throat Relief: Older children can gargle with warm salt water. Warm drinks and cold treats may also be soothing.

Fever & Pain Relief

- Acetaminophen (Tylenol)
- Ibuprofen (for children over 6 months)

Remember: **Fever helps the body fight infection and does not always need to be treated.**

What Doesn't Help?

Antibiotics: Antibiotics do not treat viral infections such as the common cold.

Over-the-Counter Cold Medicines: Most cough & cold medicines provide little benefit for young children and may cause side effects.

We do not recommend OTC cough and cold medications for children under 6 years old.

When Can My Child Return to School?

Your child can usually return to school when:

- Fever-free for **24 hours** without fever-reducing medicine
- Feeling well enough to participate in normal activities

A lingering runny nose or mild cough alone does not usually require staying home.

When Should I Call the Doctor?

Please contact us if your child has:

- A fever in an infant younger than **3 months**
- Fever lasting more than **3 days**
- Trouble breathing, wheezing, or rapid breathing
- Blue lips or signs of respiratory distress
- Signs of dehydration (dry mouth, few wet diapers, not drinking)
- Significant ear pain or ear drainage
- Excessive sleepiness or difficulty waking
- Symptoms that worsen after initial improvement
- A cough lasting longer than **3 weeks**

Prevention Tips

- Wash hands frequently with soap and water.
- Cover coughs and sneezes with an elbow.
- Avoid touching the eyes, nose, and mouth.
- Dispose of used tissues promptly.

A Final Reassurance

Colds can be frustrating, but they are a normal part of childhood. Most children recover completely with time, fluids, rest, and supportive care. While it may feel like your child is catching one illness after another, frequent colds are expected in young children, especially those in daycare, preschool, or larger families.

This handout is for educational purposes only and is not a substitute for medical advice from your healthcare provider.