



# Common Colds

## *What they are & what to do when your child gets one*

## You & Your Child

The cold is the most common childhood illness. It can make a child very uncomfortable, tired, and cranky.

A cold is usually not a serious health problem. But a child with a cold should be made as comfortable as possible and watched carefully to make sure he or she is making a steady recovery.

Viruses cause colds. About 200 different viruses can cause them. Children do not catch colds from cold weather or wet hair or drafty rooms, but their body systems may be more susceptible to viruses under such conditions.

The virus living in a child with a cold is contagious, especially during the first 3 to 4 days. When one child in school or day care has a cold, it is likely that several classmates will catch it.

There is no cure for the common cold and antibiotics do not help. Several over-the-counter medications may provide temporary relief for some cold symptoms. But never give your child any medicine without consulting your doctor first.

### **On Back**

**What you can do when your child comes down with a cold.**



A publication of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development made possible with help from the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund For Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.

For more Parenting Guides and other information, visit the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development on the Internet at [www.pitt.edu/~ocdweb/familyissues/guides](http://www.pitt.edu/~ocdweb/familyissues/guides)

**You & Your Child** may be reproduced for non-profit use only.

# What they are & what to do when your child gets one

## **Minimize the risk of catching a cold**

Most children will catch a cold now and then, especially if he or she is in day care, pre-school, or school. But there are a few steps you can take to minimize the risk.

- Hand-washing kills germs. Have your child wash his or her hands regularly and often. You, your child's teachers and caregivers should do the same.
- Discourage your child from touching his or her nose, mouth, or eyes, especially if he or she places them in the mouth.
- Teach your child to sneeze into a handkerchief, tissue, or sleeve, not into his or her hand. This helps keep hands clean and virus-free.

## **Consult your doctor before giving medications**

There are several over-the-counter medications that may help treat some of the symptoms of a cold and may help your child be more comfortable.

But always talk to your doctor before giving any over-the-counter medications to your child, especially infants. Ask your doctor which medications he or she recommends for your child.

## **Do not give your child aspirin**

Do not give aspirin to children under 18 years of age during an illness that is caused by a virus. That includes a cold. Aspirin is associated with Reye's syndrome, a rare but potentially fatal nerve disorder.

Talk to your doctor. Your doctor may recommend a non-aspirin medication.

## **Keep your child home**

If you can, keep your child home when he or she comes down with a cold, especially if your child is heavily congested and tired.

Your child should get plenty of rest and try to get your child to drink lots of fluids.

## **Remove mucus**

Children often accumulate mucus in their nose when they have a cold. Removing this mucus may help your child sleep and eat better.

Gently try to have your child blow his or her nose. Many young children, however, cannot do this. If your child can't, you can:

- Place 3 drops of warm water or salt water drops into one nostril to loosen the mucus. You can find salt water drops at your pharmacy.
- Suction the mucus out of the nostril using a soft rubber bulb syringe. Do one nostril at a time.

## **Try using a humidifier to keep air moist**

Heated indoor air is often very dry. Using a cool mist (not steam) humidifier will increase the moisture in the air.

Moist air will help keep mucus loose when a child has a cold.

Moist air will also help make your child less susceptible to a cold. Very dry air dries out the mucous lining of the respiratory tract, which can crack and become infected.

Remember to wash out the humidifier every day to prevent the growth of bacteria and mold.

## **When to call your doctor**

When to call the doctor depends on the symptoms, the age of your child, your knowledge and experience, your doctor's advice, and what puts your mind at ease.

Generally, you should call the doctor when:

- Your child has a fever that lasts more than 36 hours.
- If your baby is under 3 months old and his or her temperature is over 100.2; if your baby is 3-6 months and the temperature is over 101; or if your child is older than 6 months and his or her temperature is over 104.
- If the child complains of other problems, such as an earache, sore throat, or a rash.
- If mucus discharge from the nose lasts for more than two weeks.
- If your child has a loud, deep, dry cough.
- Even if your child has none of those symptoms, if anything concerns you about your child's condition, call a doctor.

