

# How to treat a cold: a guide for parents



Every parent knows the struggle of battling a cold. The battle is especially hard when the cold germs land right before a birthday party, a holiday gathering, or a family trip. Here are tips on how to treat a cold.

## Understanding Colds

Colds typically last about 1-2 weeks, with the first week often being the toughest. Common symptoms include a sore throat, runny nose, cough, and general fatigue. Sometimes, colds can cause a mild fever, and in some cases, a bit of tummy trouble. While there's no magic cure, there are plenty of ways to make your kids more comfortable.

## Tips for Treating Common Cold Symptoms

### Sore Throat

Not every sore throat means strep throat! If your child has a sore throat along with a runny nose and cough, it's likely part of their cold. Post nasal drip hurts. To ease the discomfort, you can give a pain reliever like acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol) every 4 hours or ibuprofen (e.g. Motrin, Advil) every 6 hours. Read this post to learn how these medicines differ from each other. Always check the label for dosing or call your doctor if you're unsure.

For kids over one year old, honey can be a soothing remedy. Offer a teaspoon or two on its own or mix into warm, decaffeinated tea or in warm milk. Alternatively, offer ice pops- the cold helps numb throat pain. And don't forget hydration! Offer plenty of fluids—breast milk or formula for babies, and juice, milk, or water for older kids.

**Call the pediatrician:** If your child's throat pain is severe or they aren't drinking enough fluids to urinate at least 3-4 times in 24 hours, it's time to reach out to their doctor.

### Runny or Stuffy Nose

To prevent the irritation a runny nose, apply a dab of petroleum jelly (e.g. Vaseline) under their noses.

For stuffiness, try using saline drops or saline spray to help loosen up the mucus. If your baby struggles to breathe through their nose, gently suction out the mucus with a bulb syringe. But don't overdo it—only suction if their stuffy nose prevents them from drinking or sleeping. Older kids can take long steamy showers and babies can take an extra bath to relieve their stuffiness.

For safety reasons, avoid decongestants and cold medicines for young children. Even for older kids, cold medicine often does not work and can cause unwanted side effects. We recommend avoiding formulations with multiple ingredients—it can be confusing to keep track of what is going into your child. For example, you might give your teen a dose of acetaminophen and then find out that the multisymptom cold medicine you gave already also contains acetaminophen.

Interesting pediatric fact: nose boogers can turn from clear to white to yellow to green, all in the same cold.

**Call the pediatrician:** If your child's runny nose lasts more than two weeks or your child complains about facial pain or swelling, call your child's doctor.

## **Coughing**

Keep your child well-hydrated, and if they're over a year old, honey can help soothe that cough. Offer 1-2 teaspoons a few times a day or mix it into a warm drink.

Create a steam-filled environment. Try running a hot shower and sitting in the bathroom with your child while they breathe in the steam. If your child has asthma, make sure to follow their asthma action plan.

It is not necessary to confine your coughing child to their bed or to the couch. Walking around encourages deeper breathing which improves lung function. Likewise, have them do deep "yoga" breathes to "pop-out" their lungs.

**Call the pediatrician:** Call their doctor if their cough doesn't improve after 10-14 days. If your child is having difficulty breathing, looks pale or blue, or becomes lethargic, take them to the closest Emergency Department.

## **Fever**

Colds can cause fevers, most often in the first few days. To treat a cold with fever-related discomfort, acetaminophen or ibuprofen can help. Check out our detailed post on managing fever for more information.

**Call the pediatrician:** If the fever lasts more than 2-3 days, or if it goes away for a day or more and then comes back, it's best to consult your child's doctor. The cold may have evolved into something else like an ear infection or pneumonia. Additionally, all babies younger than two months of age should be seen by a physician for fever of 100.4 or higher as soon as you realize they have a fever.

## **More Tips**

Watch for pain. Depending on location, pain can be a sign of a new bacterial infection on top of a cold virus. For example, ear pain can signify an ear infection, chest or shoulder pain can signify pneumonia, and pain over the face (cheeks or forehead or behind the nose) can signify a sinus infection.

Hydrate, hydrate, hydrate! Thin that mucous. Signs of dehydration include lack of tears on crying, dry mouth and lips, and as we said above, a decrease in wet diapers/frequency of urination or dark urine. If your child is not eating, they will need sugar for energy and salt to keep up their blood pressure. Vary the beverages, do not give water only. Colds are a perfect time for chicken soup.

Fresh air can work wonders, so let your child play outside or crack a window to air out the house. Going outside in the cold does not actually cause colds.

Extra story time or playtime can distract kids from feeling under the weather.

Kids can return to school once they've been fever-free for at least 24 hours and their symptoms are improving.

May the germs fighting with impunity fall to your child's immunity!

Julie Kardos, MD and Naline Lai, MD

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# **The best cold medications for children?**





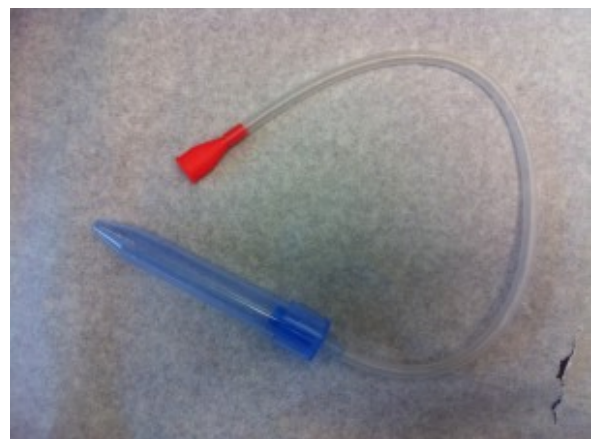
For kids over one year of age, the Honey Bear offers grrr-eat relief

So many children (and their parents) have colds now. Are you staring at the medicine display in the pharmacy, wondering which of the many cold medicines on the shelf will best help your ill child? How we wish we had a terrific medication recommendation for treatment of a kid's cold. Unfortunately, we do not.

The safety and effectiveness of cough and cold medicine has never been fully demonstrated in children. In fact, in 2007 an advisory panel including American Academy of Pediatrics

physicians, Poison Control representatives, and Baltimore Department of Public Health representatives recommended to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to stop use of cold and cough medications under six years of age.

Thousands of children under twelve years of age go to emergency rooms each year after over dosing on cough and cold medicines according to a 2008 study in *Pediatrics* . Having these medicines around the house increases the chances of accidental overdosing. Cold medications do not kill germs and will not help your child get better faster. Between 1985 and 2007, six studies showed cold medications didn't have significant effect over placebo.



The self billed "snot sucker" Nose Frida

So why are children's cough and cold medicines still around? A year after the advisory panel published their recommendations, FDA advised against using these medications in children younger than two years but data about these medications in older children is still rolling in. FDA continues to advise caution with these medications. The producers of cold medicines said at that point they would launch new studies on the safety of medication for those two to twelve years of age. In the meantime pharmaceutical companies stopped manufacturing cold medicine products for those under two years of age and changed the labels to read

“for four years old and above.”

Yes, watching your child suffer from a cold is tough. But why give something that doesn't help her get better and has potential side effects? Don't despair, even if you can't kill a cold virus, there are plenty of things you can do to make your child feel better. If she has a sore throat, sore nose, headache, or body aches, consider giving acetaminophen or ibuprofen to treat the discomfort. Give honey for her cough if she is over one year of age. Run a cool mist humidifier in her bedroom, use saline nose spray or washes, have her take a soothing, steamy shower, and teach her how to blow her nose. Break up that mucus by hydrating her well – give her a bit more than she normally drinks. For infants, help them blow their noses by using a bulb suction. However, be careful, over-zealous suctioning can lead to a torn-up nose and an overlying bacterial infection. Use a bulb suction only a few times a day.

Best of all, when your kids have a cold, unlike you, they can take as many naps as they want.

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*updated from our 2011 post*