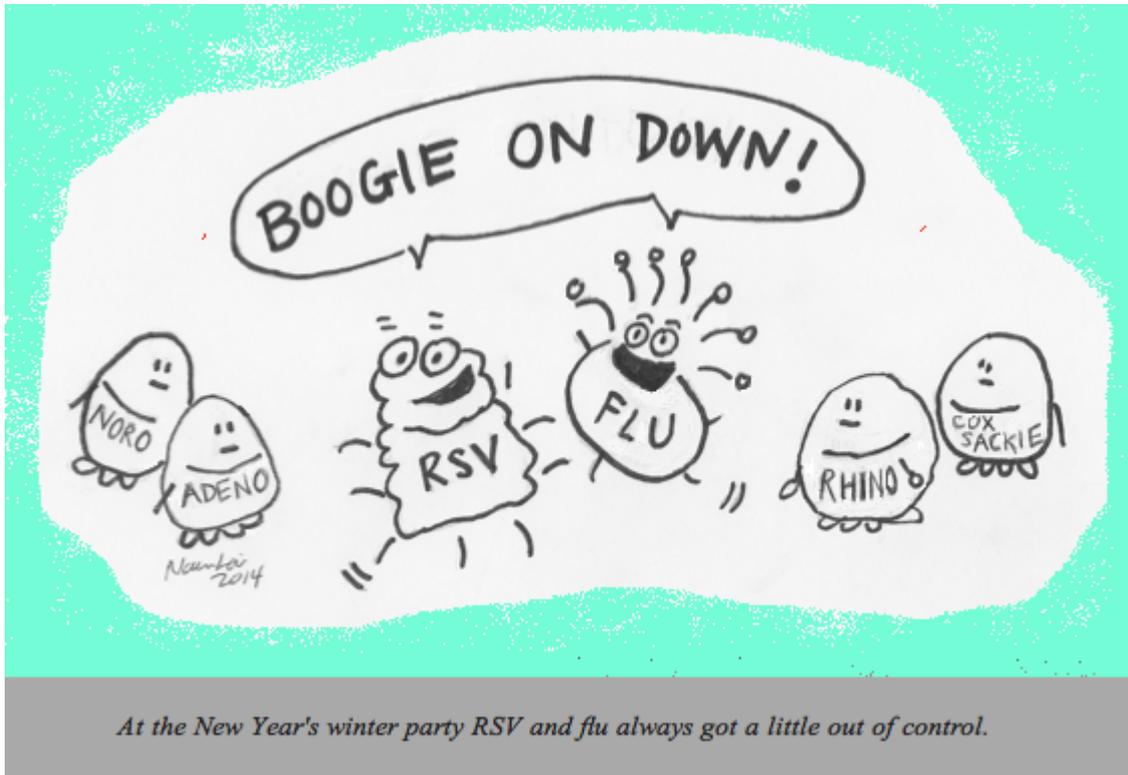


# What to do with the flu, and what about elderberry?



So you just read our post “Does my child have the flu or a cold” and you’ve decided that your child likely has the flu (short for influenza). Now what do you do? When do you call the pediatrician? Does your child need medication?

**First take a deep breath.** Then, make sure your child is breathing easily. She may be coughing a lot but as long as her breathing is unlabored, and you see no retractions (see 6 second video in our coughing post), her lungs are most likely OK. Kids who are short of breath can become agitated or lethargic. A little tiredness from illness is normal, but extreme lethargy is not.

**Think about it.** Is your child’s mental state OK? Is she thinking clearly, walking well, talking normally, and consolable? She may be more sleepy than usual but when awake she should be rational and easily engaged.

**Hydrate!** A high fever and cough increases a child's hydration needs. Make up for lost fluids by aiming to give her at least one and one-half times the amount she usually drinks in a day. For example, if she typically drinks 24 ounces of water or milk per day, try to give at least 36 ounces of fluid per day. Offer your child ANYTHING she wants to drink, including soup, juice, lemonade, electrolyte replenishers (e.g. Gatorade or Pedialyte), decaffeinated tea or a little flat decaffeinated soda.

If your child is not eating, avoid hydrating solely with plain water. Kids need salt to keep their blood pressure up and sugar to keep their energy levels up. And yes, milk is **great** to offer. **If milk doesn't cause your child to make more mucus when she is healthy, then it won't affect her nose or lungs when she is sick.** Even chocolate milk is fine! For infants, give breastmilk or formula—no need to switch. The goal is to produce PEE. Well hydrated kids pee at least every 6-8 hours. Other signs of dehydration include dark urine, dry mouths/lips, the inability to produce tears, sunken eyes, and sunken soft spot (in an infant).

**Offer food as well.** My grandmother used to say, "Feed a cold, starve a fever." I loved my grandmother, but she was incorrect about this advice. Food = nutrition = improved germ fighting ability. However, don't argue with your sick kid about eating if she is not hungry. Just know that drinking extra is a **MUST**.

**Placate pain.** She may have muscle aches, a headache, or a sore throat. Relieve her discomfort with ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil) or acetaminophen (Tylenol). Offer some ice pops and a movie on the couch. If she is in severe pain, is unable to move normally, or is inconsolable, call your child's doctor. Unable to move or inconsolable = very bad.

**It's OK to play and move about.** Your child with flu might spend a large portion of her day on the couch or in bed but it's fine to let her play and have some activity. Some walking

around and playtime helps her exercise her lungs. "Moving" her lungs with a cough actually prevents pneumonia by preventing germy mucus from lodging in the lungs. Also, seeing that your child can walk around, despite her aches and discomfort, will reassure you that she is handling her illness.

**Does every kid with flu need to see a doctor?** No. Some kids have medical problems that predispose them to complications of illness and doctors will want to see those kids more often. Most otherwise healthy kids get through the flu, as long as they drink enough and can be kept comfortable. The fever from flu usually lasts from 4-7 days and can go quite high, but you know from reading our fever post that the number alone is not what you fear. What matters is how your child is acting.

**Some reasons your child should see a doctor:**

- difficulty breathing
- change in mental state or you cannot console her
- your child is dehydrated
- a new symptom that concerns you
- the fever goes away for a day or two and then returns with a vengeance
- fever goes on more than 4-7 days, but you can certainly call the doctor to check in by day 3-5
- a rash appears during the flu illness (this can be a sign of overwhelming bacterial infection, not the flu)
- new pain (eg. ear pain from an ear infection) or severe pain
- your gut instinct tells you that your child needs to see a doctor

**What about Tamiflu (brand name for oseltamivir) ?** Some areas of the United States are experiencing a shortage of this anti-flu medicine. Oseltamivir can lesson the severity of flu symptoms and perhaps shorten how long the flu lasts by about a day. Since most people recover in about the same amount of time without the medication, the CDC (Centers for Disease Control) and the AAP (American Academy of Pediatrics) issued treatment guidelines. Kids with certain lung, heart,

neurologic, or immune system diseases, kids with diabetes, and kids under the age of two years may be medication candidates.

You can check the exhaustive list here. The other two medications that cover the two main types of flu are not available in oral form.

**Better than Tamiflu is the flu vaccine.** Remember the saying, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure?" A 2017 study showed that the flu vaccine prevented kids from dying of the flu. Vaccinated kids who do end up with the flu tend to have less severe illness. The vaccine prevents several types of the flu, so even if your child gets flu and did not receive the flu shot this season, it's not too late. Take her to get it after her fever is gone. Also put in a reminder to yourself to schedule a flu vaccine appointment for your child next September, in advance of next winter's flu season.

**Over-the-counter flu medications** do not treat the flu, but they can give side effects. In fact, cough and cold medicines should not be given to children younger than four years, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Instead, try these natural remedies:

- If older than one year, you can give honey for her cough and to soothe her throat.

- 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.

- 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.

**What about black elderberry (sambucus)?** Articles abound on social media about the benefits of black elderberry in fighting flu symptoms. However, if you read a credible source such as the National Institute of Health information site about complementary and alternative medicine, you will find,

“Although some preliminary research indicates that elderberry may relieve flu symptoms, the evidence is not strong enough to support its use for this purpose.” The research was not conducted with kids, so unfortunately we cannot recommend this unproven treatment for flu.

Take heart. While the groundhog predicted 6 more weeks of winter this year, history shows that the groundhog is usually wrong.

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