

Colds in Children

Overview

A common cold is a viral infection of the upper respiratory tract, and symptoms often include low grade fever, sneezing, sore throat, blocked or runny nose which may last a couple of weeks. Because the source of the infection is viral, antibiotics are not required unless a secondary bacterial infection is suspected by your doctor.

Medications and non-pharmacological therapies may be used to treat some of the symptoms, such as fever and nasal congestion. Cough suppressants are generally not recommended in children, particularly in those less than 2 years of age.

Colds are more common in, winter, and children are more at risk than adults. Most young children will get on average between 5 to 10 viral respiratory infections a year, double the number that affects adults.

Cold is a contagious condition.

The virus can be spread through coughing, sneezing and hand contact. Good hygiene like hand washing, will help reduce exposure to these viruses.

The term "flu" is used to describe an infection caused by a particular virus called influenza. Children with influenza may have similar symptoms to a cold, but the child appears more unwell and often has a high fever. However, most people with influenza tend to have a mild illness.

Young children (less than 2 years old) and those with a chronic illness (e.g. asthma, diabetes, heart disease, renal disease, immune suppression) are at particular risk. Some children with influenza may develop a secondary bacterial infection.

Vaccination with the influenza vaccine can reduce the risk of influenza.

The influenza vaccine is not part of the routine immunisation schedule, and since the influenza virus can change from year to year, yearly vaccination to cover for the most important type(s) causing infection is required.

Discuss with your doctor whether the influenza vaccination would be recommended for your child. The vaccine can be administered to any person who wishes to reduce the likelihood of becoming ill with influenza.

Causes

Colds are caused by viruses, which enter the body through the nose, mouth or even the eyes, before settling in the upper respiratory system.

Factors that can increase the risk of developing a cold/flu include:

- ▶ Young age (especially children < 2 years of age).
- ▶ Winter season.
- ▶ Close contact with infected individuals. High risk locations include schools and childcare facilities.
- ▶ Immature or compromised immune system. This can include children with cancer, HIV, on immune suppressant medications and premature or low birthweight babies.
- ▶ Exposure to cigarette smoke may exacerbate cold symptoms.
- ▶ Chronic illness (e.g. asthma, diabetes, renal disease, **cardiac disease**).

Symptoms

The incubation period for a common cold is usually 24 to 72 hours, and children usually experience a fever and sore throat to start with.

Other symptoms include:

- ▶ Nasal irritation, including blocked or runny nose. Discharge from the nose may be clear to yellow or greenish.
- ▶ Sneezing.
- ▶ Sinus pain.
- ▶ Headache.
- ▶ Irritability.
- ▶ Fatigue.
- ▶ Loss of appetite.
- ▶ Earache.
- ▶ Change in the voice, such as huskiness.
- ▶ Infants may have difficulty feeding, mainly due to nasal congestion.

These symptoms will vary in severity, and children might have all or just a few. There is usually no need to go to the doctor, as a cold will resolve itself with rest, plenty of fluid and pain relief, which will also assist with fever.

However if the condition deteriorates and involves high temperatures above 38.5°C, extreme fatigue, sensitivity to light, headache, neck stiffness or rashes on the skin, medical advice should be sought immediately.

Treatment

There is no cure for the common cold. There is usually no need to go to the

doctor, as a cold will resolve itself with rest, plenty of fluid and pain relief.

There are many reported treatments for the common cold, from old fashioned remedies to pharmaceutical preparations to relieve symptoms. It is very important to remember that a viral infection will not be assisted by antibiotics. As colds are caused by viruses, antibiotics will not speed up the recovery, stop it from getting worse or prevent transmission to others. Inappropriate use of antibiotics may increase the risk of developing antibiotic resistant bacteria.

Keeping it simple is the best line of defence when treating the common cold in children.

Lifestyle and Diet

It is difficult to prevent the risk of contracting a common cold, especially in children, but parents and carers can follow some steps to reduce the spread of infection:

Encourage children to cover their mouth when the cough or sneeze.

Avoid sharing cups and eating utensils.

Wash hands regularly, particularly when preparing food and before eating, or after blowing the nose.

Use disposable tissues to blow the nose rather than handkerchiefs. Throw them away after a single use.

Avoid exposure to cigarette smoke.

Discuss the option of the influenza vaccination with your doctor.

Support & Online Services

Here are some additional support and resources:

- ▶ The National Prescribing Service (NPS) has information about treating the common cold www.nps.org.au
- ▶ The Australian Lung Foundation www.lungfoundation.com.au
- ▶ Early Childhood Australia www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au
- ▶ The Australian Government's Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) has published a review of cough and cold medicines in children www.tga.gov.au
- ▶ The National Asthma Council Australia www.nationalasthma.org.au

