

Colds (upper respiratory tract infections, or URTIs)

What is a cold?

A cold or upper respiratory infection is an infection of the nose and throat caused by a virus.

Symptoms of a cold may include:

- runny or stuffy nose
- fever
- sore throat
- a cough or hoarse voice
- red eyes
- swollen lymph nodes in the neck.

What is the cause?

The cold viruses are spread from one person to another by hand contact, coughing, and sneezing. Colds are not caused by cold air or drafts. Because there are up to 200 viruses that cause colds, most healthy children get at least 6 colds a year.

Many children and adults have a very runny nose in the wintertime when they are breathing cold air. The nose usually stops running within 15 minutes after a person comes indoors. It requires no treatment beyond a handkerchief and has nothing to do with cold or an infection.

How long does a cold last?

Usually the fever lasts 2 or 3 days. The sore throat may last 5 days. Runny nose and congestion may last up to 2 weeks. A cough may last 3 weeks. Colds are not serious.

Between 5% and 10% of children develop a bacterial infection from a cold. Watch for signs of infections such as ongoing fever, earaches, yellow drainage from the eyes, sinus pressure or pain, or rapid breathing.

How can I take care of my child?

Treatments do not affect how long a cold lasts. However, we can relieve many of the symptoms

Lots of fluids and saline nose drops

Young infants may have trouble feeding as they have difficulty breathing through their mouth. Feeds will need to be offered more often and for shorter times than usual.

Saline drops or spray put in the nose before feeds may help clear the nose to assist feeding. Saline sprays are available from the chemist or a mixture of ½ teaspoon of salt in 250ml of warm water, can be used.

Treatment for other symptoms of colds

- **Fever:** Fever does not always need to be treated. It is the body's natural response to infection and helps to fight the infection. If however, your child is miserable and unwell with a fever over 38.5°C, you could use paracetamol (Pandadol) or ibuprofen (Nurofen) to help reduce these symptoms. Paracetamol can be given every 4 to 6 hours.
- **Sore throat:** You could use paracetamol or ibuprofen. Do not give children under 5 years hard 'lollies' for a sore throat.
- **Cough:** Coughing is the natural way for a child to get rid of mucus and children under 6 years of age should not be given medicine to stop coughing. If you want to give an older child a cough medicine, make sure it is one made for children. Honey (in children older than 12 months) or agave syrup are natural ways of soothing a cough
- **Red eyes:** Rinse frequently with wet cotton balls.
- **Poor appetite:** Encourage your child to drink nutritious fluids such as soups or smoothies.
- **Muscle aches -** You could use paracetamol or ibuprofen.



Do not give leftover antibiotics for uncomplicated colds because they have no effect on viruses and may be harmful.

Most over-the-counter cold remedies or tablets do not work. Nothing can make a cold last a shorter time. Avoid drugs that have several ingredients because there is a greater chance of side effects from these drugs.

Prevention of colds

A cold is caused by direct contact with someone who already has a cold. Over the years we are all exposed to many colds and develop some immunity to them.

Complications from colds are more common in children during the first year of life.

Try to avoid undue exposure of young babies to other children or adults with colds, or day care.

A humidifier prevents drying of the nose and throat lining, which may help make them less susceptible to infections.

Vitamin C has not been shown to prevent or shorten colds. Large doses of vitamin C (for example, 2 grams) cause diarrhoea.

When should I see a doctor?

Urgently if:

- Breathing becomes difficult AND is no better after you clear the nose.
- Your child seems very sick.

During office hours if:

- The fever lasts more than 3 days.
- The runny nose lasts more than 14 days.
- The eyes develop a yellow discharge with redness of the eyelids.
- You can't unblock the nose enough for your infant to drink enough.
- You think your child may have an earache or sinus pain.
- Your child's sore throat last more than 5 days.
- You have other questions or concerns.

For more information

Paediatric Emergency Department

Women's and Children's Hospital
72 King William Road
North Adelaide SA 5006
Tel 08 8161 7044
Fax 08 8161 6750
<http://www.wch.sa.gov.au>

Non-English speaking: for information in languages other than English, call the interpreting and Translating Centre and ask them to call Department of Health. This service is available at no cost to you, contact (08) 8226 1990.

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