

Common Cold

The “common cold” is a viral infection of the nose and throat. It is also known as an upper respiratory tract infection. There are over 200 different viruses that can cause colds. It is normal for children to have an average of 6 to 8 colds per year. Having colds more often is not a sign of a weak immune system. Children develop their immune system by being exposed to many viruses over the years. As children get older, they get sick less often.

The ‘flu’ refers to a specific viral infection caused by the Influenza virus. This virus can make people quite sick, especially young children and older adults. People with the flu have more breathing difficulties and high fevers.



Key Points

- Colds are caused by many different viruses and are common in children
- Colds cause runny nose, sneezing, cough and fevers
- Colds get better on their own – keep your child comfortable and hydrated
- If your child has a fever for 5 days or is not getting better, they may have a bacterial complication and should see their doctor



Seek Immediate Medical Attention if:

- Your child is having trouble breathing
- Your child’s lips turn blue
- Your child is complaining of neck pain or stiffness
- Your child is lethargic (very sleepy)
- Your child is dehydrated (dry mouth, no tears, no pee)

Symptoms

Children with a cold will usually have:

- Stuffy, runny nose
- Sneezing
- Cough
- Fever
- Sore throat
- Decreased appetite

Cold symptoms usually last for 3 to 7 days. Often, symptoms like cough or runny nose, can linger for up to two to three weeks.

Fevers usually happen on the first few days your child is sick. Fevers from a cold should get better within 3 to 5 days.

Are there complications from colds?

Most colds are mild and children get better on their own in about one week. About 5 to 10 per cent of kids can develop a bacterial infection because of their cold. Common bacterial infections after a cold include: ear, sinus or chest infections.

Signs that your child may have a bacterial infection are fever lasting more than 4 to 5 days or not feeling better after the first 3 to 5 days of their cold. Your child should be checked by their doctor if they are not better after the first few days of being sick.

Children with asthma or lung problems may have more trouble breathing when they have a cold.

When should my child see a doctor?

While most children will have mild symptoms and get better in a few days, consider having your child seen by a doctor if they are:

- Younger than 3 months
- Having trouble breast/bottle feeding because of their stuffy nose
- Having fevers for more than 5 days
- Having a runny nose that hasn't improved after 10 days
- Complaining of ear pain or fluid draining from their ear

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Treatment

There is no medication to treat a cold, or make it go away faster. Your child's body will take care of the virus. The best thing to do is to make your child feel comfortable while they are sick.

1. Runny nose:

- Cleaning out your child's nose can make their breathing easier - clean their nose before sleep and as often as they need during the day
- Use an over the counter salt water nose spray (eg: Hydrasense™). Spray or drop salt water in each nostril and suck out the mucous. Avoid making your own salt water solutions at home
- For babies who are still bottle or breast feeding, try to clean their nose before each feed
- Humidity can help loosen the mucous in your child's nose and chest. You can try a warm bath or using a cool mist humidifier in their room. Please use humidifiers as directed and keep out of reach from children

2. Fever and discomfort:

- You may give Acetaminophen (Tylenol® or Tempra®) or Ibuprofen (Advil® or Motrin®) to keep your child comfortable. Use as directed on the packaging or instructed by a health care provider

3. Cough

- Cough is a common cold symptom and there is no medicine to make it go away faster. The cough will get better as your child feels better
- Keep your child sitting or upright because it is easier for them to breath in this position
- Over the counter cough medications can have harmful side effects in children. They are NOT recommended in children under 6 years of age

4. Antibiotics

- Colds are viral infections and antibiotics don't work on viruses
- If your child develops a bacterial complication, they may need antibiotics to treat that infection
- Your doctor can examine your child to determine if they need antibiotics

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How can I prevent it from spreading?

Colds are very contagious. They are spread through close contact with someone who is sick and coughing or sneezing around you. Touching toys or sharing food with someone who is sick can spread the virus. Children do not get colds from cold air or drafts.

Children with colds are contagious for up to five days after they first get sick. You should keep your child at home if they have a fever or are coughing a lot.

Other tips to prevent spreading the virus:

- Keep your child away from young babies (less than 3 months) for as long as you can while they are sick
- Hand washing is important to stop the spread of infections. Teach children to wash their hands before and after eating, coughing or sneezing
- Routine immunizations do not prevent children from getting colds, but they can prevent serious bacterial complications
- The yearly influenza vaccine helps protect children from becoming very sick from the flu

Know Your Options

It can be scary when your child is sick. But in most cases, you don't need to go to the emergency department. If you're unsure, [we're here to help](#).



Please Note

The content provided on these pages is not intended to replace medical advice. If you have concerns about the health of your child, contact your health care provider directly. If your child has an emergency, go to the nearest emergency department or call 911. Alberta Health Services and Project HEAL strive to ensure that all material is correct but will not be held liable for errors or incomplete information contained in these pages.