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. Vasoline) 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!

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