**Coughs and Colds in Children**

**What causes coughs and colds?**

Most coughs and colds are caused by germs called viruses. Many different viruses can infect the nose and throat. They are passed on by coughing and sneezing the virus into the air. An average preschool and primary school child has 3-8 coughs or colds per year. Some children will have more than this. Sometimes several coughs or colds occur one after the other. A child who lives with smokers has an increased risk of developing coughs and colds, and the colds they get may last longer.

**What are the symptoms?**

* The common symptoms are a cough and a runny nose. The cough is often worse at night. Coughing does not damage the lungs.
* In addition, a child may have a raised temperature (fever), a sore throat, headache, and tiredness; they may be off their food. Sometimes children may be sick (vomit) after a bout of coughing.
* A build-up of mucus behind the eardrums may cause dulled hearing or mild earache.
* Very young children often sleep a lot when they are unwell.

**What are the treatments for coughs and colds?**

There is no magic cure! Typically, symptoms are worse in the first 2-3 days, and then ease over the next few days as the immune system clears the virus. An irritating cough may linger for up to 2-4 weeks after other symptoms have gone. [Antibiotics do not kill viruses](https://patient.info/health/antibiotics-leaflet/features/why-wasnt-i-prescribed-antibiotics), so are of no use for common coughs and colds.

### Supportive treatment

Coughs and colds often do not need any treatment.

Make sure your child has enough to drink. Low body fluid (dehydration) may develop if a child has a raised temperature (fever) and does not drink much.

Resting probably helps the body to fight off viruses more quickly.

### Treatment to ease symptoms

[Paracetamol](https://patient.info/medicine/paracetamol-calpol-disprol-hedex-panadol) can ease aches and pains, headaches and fever. [Ibuprofen](https://patient.info/medicine/ibuprofen-for-pain-and-inflammation-advil-brufen-calprofen-nurofen) is an alternative. Both are sold in pharmacies in liquid form for children. There are various brands - ask the pharmacist if you are unsure what is suitable.

### Saline drops for blocked nose

A popular treatment for a blocked nose in a baby is to put a few drops of salt water (saline) into the nose just before feeds. Some people feel that this helps to clear the nose to make feeding easier. There is little scientific evidence as to how well this works, but it may be worth a try if feeding is difficult. You can buy saline drops from pharmacies.

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### Vapour rubs

Vapour rubs are another popular treatment. They can be applied to the chest and back. Avoid application directly to the nostril area. Again, there is little scientific evidence as to how well they work.

### Steam inhalation

Inhaling steam can also help relieve congestion and coughing. The safest way to do this with children is to sit in the bathroom with a hot shower/hot taps running.

### Cough sweets

Sucking menthol or other medicated sweets can help ease irritating coughs and sore throats in older children.

## What about cold and cough remedies?

Cough or cold remedies may be advertised and are sold in pharmacies. They contain various ingredients or combinations of ingredients such as paracetamol, [decongestants](https://patient.info/health/cough-leaflet/decongestants), [antihistamines](https://patient.info/health/allergies/antihistamines) and cough remedies. However, there is no convincing evidence that these cough and cold remedies work. Also, they may have side-effects such as allergic reactions, problems with sleeping or making you see or hear things that are not really there (hallucinations).

In March 2009 an important statement was issued by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). It said that parents and carers should no longer use over-the-counter (OTC) cough and cold medicines in children aged under 6 years. For 6- to 12-year-olds these medicines continue to be available (as there is less risk of side-effects in older children). However, they are only sold in pharmacies, with clearer advice on the packaging and from the pharmacist. **Note**: paracetamol and ibuprofen are not classed as cough and cold medicines and can still be given to children.

A warm drink made with honey and lemon juice can be as soothing to an irritated or sore throat as cough medicine that you buy at the chemist. Please note that honey should not be given to babies under 1 year old.

Cough is a difficult symptom to control. Sometimes it seems as if your child is coughing all the time. They may cough so hard that they are sick. This is distressing but it does not necessarily indicate that they need additional treatment from a doctor.

## What symptoms should I look out for?

Most coughs and colds get better without complications. Sometimes a more serious infection develops from an initial viral infection. For example, [an ear infection](https://patient.info/health/earache-ear-pain/ear-infection-otitis-media), [chest infection](https://patient.info/health/chest-infection) or [pneumonia](https://patient.info/health/chest-infection/pneumonia). Symptoms to look out for that may mean your child has more than just a cold include:

* Breathing problems - [wheezing](https://patient.info/health/wheeze), fast breathing, noisy breathing or difficulty with breathing.
* Being unable to swallow (this may show up as excessive drooling).
* Drowsiness.
* Unusual irritability or persistent crying, in a baby, or if the baby is not taking feeds.
* A rash.
* Chest pains.
* Persistent [high temperatures](https://patient.info/health/fever-in-children-high-temperature), particularly if a baby aged less than 3 months has a raised temperature (fever) higher than 38°C.
* Very bad (severe) headache, sore throat, earache or swollen glands.
* A cough that persists for longer than 3-4 weeks.
* Symptoms getting worse rather than better after about five days of a cold.
* Symptoms (other than an irritating cough) lasting more than about ten days. This is particularly important if your child has mucus or phlegm (sputum) which is green, yellow or brown, as it may indicate infection with other germs called bacteria.
* Any symptom that you cannot explain.

See a doctor if any symptoms develop that you are concerned about. This is particularly important if your child has a long-term illness or medical condition - for example, chest/breathing/heart problems or neurological disease. Doctors are skilled at checking children over to rule out serious illness. They may not be able to prescribe anything more effective for a common cough or cold, but a check-over can be reassuring.

Reference:

<https://patient.info/health/cough-leaflet/coughs-and-colds-in-children>