



# Colds

## Patient and Family Education

**This teaching sheet contains general information only. Your child's doctor or a member of your child's health care team will talk with you about specific care for your child.**

### What is a cold?

A cold is an infection of the nose, throat, sinuses and upper airways. Colds are caused by a virus so it is easy to pass a cold from one person to another. A child may have as many as six or more colds a year.

Since a virus causes a cold, there is no medicine that can cure a cold. Antibiotics do not help and could do harm. A cold usually goes away on its own in 7 to 10 days. A cough may last 2 to 3 weeks.

Drafts and air conditioning do not cause colds. There is no way to prevent colds, but these things can help:

- Avoid crowded places, especially during cold and flu season.
- Hand hygiene is the most important thing you can do to help prevent the spread of infections. Teach your children to do these things too. You may use:
  - Soap and water - wash your hands well for at least 15 seconds. Rinse and dry them well.
  - An alcohol hand cleaner if your hands do not have any visible dirt or grime on them.

### What are the possible symptoms?

Your child may have one or more of these:

- Be tired
- Aches and pains
- A runny or congested nose. Sometimes nose drainage may be yellow or green colored
- A sore throat
- Weepy eyes
- A cough or hoarse voice
- Fever (temperature over 100.3°F)
- Vomiting and loose stools. This is more likely in young children

### What can I do for my child?

There are some things you can do for your child to make him feel better until the cold is gone:

- Give lots of cool, clear liquids so that he does not get dehydrated (dried out). Do not try to force your child to eat. It is normal to have less appetite with a cold.
- Acetaminophen (Tylenol or other less costly store brand) or ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil or other less costly store brand) may be given for fever, aches and pain. Follow the directions on the box carefully or ask your doctor how much medicine to give.
  - **DO NOT** give your child more than 5 doses of acetaminophen in a 24-hour period.
  - **DO NOT** give acetaminophen to babies younger than 3 months of age without a doctor's order.
  - **DO NOT** give ibuprofen to babies younger than 6 months of age without a doctor's advice.
  - **DO NOT** use acetaminophen and ibuprofen together. **DO NOT** alternate.
- Keep him at home until the fever is gone.
- Treat your baby's stuffy nose with salt-water drops and a bulb syringe.

**In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.**

## Colds, continued

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- Avoid cigarette smoke and odor around your child.
- Coughing helps clear mucus from the chest and lungs.
  - Most children will not spit out the mucus but will swallow it into their stomachs. This is not a problem.
- Give cough and cold medicines only as advised by your child's doctor. This includes both prescription and over-the-counter medicines.
  - For children older than 6 years of age – cough and cold medicines do not work in this age group. They also can cause serious side effects.
  - Do not give a child younger than 6 years old any medicine that is made for children over the age of 6.
  - Many brands of cough and cold medicines have the same kinds or have unnecessary ingredients. Using more than 1 brand or mixing brands can cause a serious overdose and harm in your child.
  - Do not use a combination cold medicine that contains acetaminophen or ibuprofen.

### When should I call the doctor?

#### Call 911 or your local ambulance service right away if your child:

- Is so tired and weak that he hardly responds to you.
- Is working very hard to breathe or finds it hard to take a breath. Some signs of breathing problems may include:
  - Grunts when he breathes.
  - Has chest retractions (skin pulling in around the ribs and chest when breathing).
  - Has a blue or dark purple color to the nail beds, lips or gums.
  - Stops breathing for more than 10 seconds.
  - Cannot speak while trying to breathe.
- Has any breathing problem that needs care **right away**.

#### Call your child's doctor if your child:

- Does not smile or show interest in play for at least a few minutes during a four-hour period.
- Wheezes or breathes harder than he did when he was seen by the doctor.
- Has a tight feeling in the chest or chest pain.
- Cannot be calmed for at least a few minutes each hour using methods that usually work for your child, such as holding, rocking, pacifiers or soothing talk.
- Pulls at his ears or shows signs of ear pain.
- Is not better or has a feeling of tiredness and weakness after three days.
- Has any fever and is younger than 3 months old, or has a fever lasting longer than three days in older babies.

#### Call if your baby:

- Is unable to breathe and suck at the same time or chokes when he sucks.

#### Also call if you:

- See signs of dehydration (drying out):
  - No urine for six to eight hours in an infant younger than one year old
  - No urine in more than eight hours in a child older than one year old
  - No tears when crying
  - Sunken eyes
  - Dry lips and mouth
- See bloody saliva, phlegm or mucus.
- Have any questions or concerns about how your child looks or feels.

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