

colds



A cold is caused by a virus that affects the nose and throat. It is the most common infectious illness, especially for young children. Young children may have eight to ten colds each year, with the highest number usually being during the first two years in child care, kindergarten or school. A cold in itself is not serious but colds can sometimes lead to other infections such as ear infections and tonsillitis.

Alert!

A doctor should see a child if the child

- seems unwell
- has a high temperature (over about 39° C) or a lower temperature that lasts more than a day or two
- is short of breath
- coughs a lot
- seems tired
- is vomiting
- or is in pain (e.g. from earache).

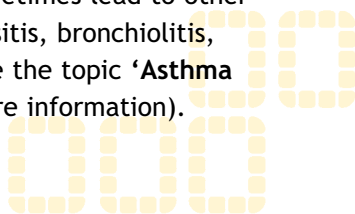
Any child who suddenly starts to cough without being unwell first, may have breathed something into the airways (choking) and should be seen by a doctor. A child with a one-sided runny or blocked nose may have something stuck in the nose and also should be seen by a doctor.

What is a cold?

- A cold is an infection of the nose and throat usually caused by a virus.
- The most common signs of having a cold are sore throat, cough, sneezing and a runny nose. Children may have a fever but usually their temperature is not very high.
- What comes out of the nose is usually clear to start with, then within about a day can become thicker, yellow and sometimes green.
- A blocked nose forces the child to breathe through the mouth and this makes the throat dry and it feels sorer.
- Usually children with colds don't feel well.
- They may have a headache and not want to eat much.
- Some children may vomit and have diarrhoea as well.
- A blocked nose can be the most difficult part of a cold, especially for babies, because it makes it hard for them to feed and sleep.

What causes a cold?

- Colds are can be caused by one of more than 200 different viruses. This is why people get so many colds, because there are so many different infections to catch.
- The same viruses sometimes lead to other illnesses such as sinusitis, bronchiolitis, croup, or asthma (see the topic '**Asthma in childhood**' for more information).



What else can look like a cold?

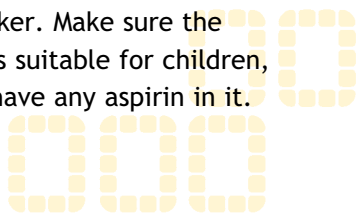
- Something stuck in the nose can cause a blocked nose or a runny nose, but it is usually only on one side.
- Hay fever causes sneezing and a runny nose (usually with itchy eyes as well).
- Influenza causes children to feel ill with headache, body aches and a raised temperature, often without a blocked, runny nose.

Can you prevent colds?

The time when people with colds are most likely to pass them on to someone else is in the first two to four days after the cold starts, especially when the person is sneezing, coughing or has a very runny nose.

- Colds are spread by little drops in the air from coughing or sneezing, or by touching the nose or mouth of someone with a cold and then touching your own nose or mouth, or after touching something the person has coughed or sneezed onto (such as a tissue).
- Since colds are everywhere it is almost impossible to stop children from getting colds, but there are some things which may help.
 - Try not to let people with colds come close to, or hold, babies.
 - Wash your own and children's hands, especially after coughing, sneezing or blowing noses and before eating.

- Teach children to cover their nose and mouth when coughing or sneezing. They need to wash their hands straight afterwards.
- Use tissues once and then throw them in the bin, instead of handkerchiefs.
- If anyone has a cold, they should try not to pass it on. They should stay home from childcare, school or work whenever possible.
- There are no immunisations against colds, because of all of the different viruses that cause them, and there are not likely to be immunisations in the near future.
- Eating healthy food seems to help, but even very healthy people can get colds.
- There is no proof that extra vitamin C helps prevent colds, but many people use vitamin C. It seems that it may shorten the time a cold lasts by a small amount. It does not do any harm unless you take very large doses.
- Recent research is showing that taking extra zinc can shorten the time some people are unwell and make the symptoms less severe. Talk with your doctor or pharmacist (chemist) to find out the best type of zinc preparation if you want to try this.
- If a person has been near another person who has a cold, taking Echinacea might prevent a cold developing. It also might be useful in the very early stages of a cold, making recovery quicker. Make sure the preparation you use is suitable for children, and that it does not have any aspirin in it.



- The air passages and lungs of babies and children are smaller, more delicate and sensitive to the effects of the chemicals in the tobacco smoke if they are around people who smoke. Tobacco smoke irritates the eyes and nasal passages and as a result children can catch more colds and other respiratory illnesses.

What to do if your child gets a cold

No treatment will cure your child's cold, or make it go away much more quickly, but you can help him feel more comfortable.

- **Rest:** (need not be in bed), extra drinks and comforting are important.
- **Drinks:** extra drinks should be given to children with a cold. If the child doesn't want to drink much, try giving lots of small sips of water, milk or juice, or iceblocks to suck for older children.
- **Food:** many children with a cold don't want to eat much for a couple of days. This is not important. They will quickly put back any weight they have lost when they are well again. It is not necessary to 'feed a cold'.
- **Paracetamol or ibuprofen:** for a high fever (over about 38.5°C), sore throat or painful ears, can help the child feel more comfortable. **Do not give aspirin to a child or young person under the age of 15 years, especially during a cold, since it may cause a rare but very serious illness called Reye's Syndrome.**

- Antibiotics cannot cure a cold because it is a viral infection, and they do not seem to stop children from getting asthma, ear infections, or sinusitis.

The topic **'Feeling sick'** has suggestions for caring for a sick child.

Blocked nose

- If the stuff that comes out of a 'runny nose' turns green, the child may have a more serious problem, such as sinusitis, and should be seen by a doctor.
- Saline nose drops may be helpful for babies. Get them already made up from a chemist. Use them before a feed or before putting the baby down to sleep.
- Other nose drops may be helpful for young children, but this needs to be discussed with a doctor or chemist, because nose drops and sprays made for older children and adults can be harmful for young children.
- Decongestant medicines may be useful for some children, but they can have upsetting side effects such as irritability, restlessness, difficulty with sleeping, or drowsiness depending on which is used. Decongestant medicines do not seem to prevent ear infections.
- Increasing the moisture in the air in the room using a vaporiser may be helpful, but the vaporiser must be used safely and kept out of reach of children.



- Children are not able to learn how to blow their nose before they are about four years old, so they will need help to wipe their nose.
- Nose sprays may be helpful for older children, they make the nose less runny and 'stuffy', but make sure it is one made for children and that it is only used for two or three days.
- If the end of the nose becomes red and sore, petroleum jelly (vaseline) smeared lightly around the nostrils can soothe.
- Generally we advise that vapour rubs that are rubbed onto the skin should not be used for very young children because they contain some chemicals which could be dangerous, especially if they are swallowed. The risk is probably very small.

Cough

- Medicines to stop a cough are not suitable for children unless the child has been looked at by a doctor who has said that it is safe to use these medicines. If children have a bad or irritating cough it can mean that there is something else going on, such as asthma, which needs to be treated. Medicines that stop coughing should not be used for asthma.

Sore throat

- If the child has a very sore throat (does not want to eat or drink for example), this could be tonsillitis and the child needs to be seen by a doctor. For a mild sore throat, extra cool drinks and some paracetamol or ibuprofen may help. Do not give hard cough or throat lollies to young children (e.g. under the age of about four years) because of the risk of choking.

Eyes

- If eyes are slightly sticky in the morning, clean them with clean damp cotton wool balls.
- If they have a discharge or the eyes are red, see a doctor as this may be conjunctivitis.

What colds can cause

- Up to about a quarter of young children with a cold go on to have an ear infection as well, but this happens less often as the child grows older.
- Asthma in young children is usually started off by a cold.
- Colds can also start off croup and sinusitis.



When to see a doctor

- Any child who is still quite unwell after about three to four days, who has a high fever (e.g. over about 38.5°C) which goes for more than 24 to 48 hours, or who becomes more unwell, or shows signs of pain (e.g. earache, very sore throat) should be seen by a doctor.
- Vomiting, not drinking, shortness of breath, pain when breathing, unusual sleepiness or crying, a lot of coughing, difficulty hearing are all signs that the child needs to be seen by a doctor.

Plane travelling with colds

- Try to avoid if possible taking any child who has a cold on a plane trip, because the fall in air pressure can cause severe ear problems and pain.
- If you have to take a child with a cold, see a doctor before the trip.
- If the child or adult has had a recent cold, using decongestant nose sprays, drops or medications 15 to 20 minutes before takeoff and landing may help.

For more information contact:

- Local Community Child Health Nurse
- Local Family Doctor
- Ngala Family Resource Centre Helpline
8.00 a.m. - 8.00 p.m. 7 days a week
Telephone (08) 9368 9368
Outside metro area - Freecall 1800 111 546
www.ngala.com.au
- Parent Help Centre/Parenting line
Telephone (08) 9272 1466 (24 hr service)
Outside metro area - Freecall 1800 654 432



© Children, Youth and Women's Health Service, reproduced with permission. The South Australian Government does not accept responsibility for the accuracy of this reproduction. The original version is published at <http://www.cyh.com>

Warning

This document is published as general information only. You should always consult a healthcare professional for diagnosis and treatment of any health condition or symptoms.



Disclaimer

The advice and information contained herein is provided in good faith as a public service. However the accuracy of any statements made is not guaranteed and it is the responsibility of readers to make their own enquiries as to the accuracy, currency and appropriateness of any information or advice provided. Liability for any act or omission occurring in reliance on this document or for any loss, damage or injury occurring as a consequence of such act or omission is expressly disclaimed.