

Colds and Flu in Children

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“Hand washing with soap and water before eating and after going to the restroom is one of the best things kids can do to prevent colds and flu.”

—Scott Gee, MD, Pediatrician,
Kaiser Permanente

Colds, flu, and chest colds (bronchitis) are common. Most children get 6 to 10 colds each year. Many begin to feel better within a week, but symptoms can last up to three weeks. Yellow or green mucus is common with a cold and does *not* mean that your child needs antibiotics.

Antibiotics

Antibiotics will not help your child's cold, flu, or chest cold (bronchitis). Antibiotics only kill bacteria—not viruses—and colds and flu are caused by viruses. Using antibiotics when they are not needed can be harmful. It increases your child's chances of being infected with bacteria that antibiotics cannot kill.

Prevention

To help keep your child healthy:

- The CDC recommends a **flu shot for all children 6 months and older and everyone in your household**. Your doctor will tell you if your infant or young child needs a second dose.
- Take extra care to maintain your child's health during cold and flu season. Complications from colds and flu may be more severe for children with a chronic condition such as asthma or diabetes.
- Teach your child to wash his hands often and use alcohol-based hand sanitizer gel. Also teach children to sneeze into the crook of the elbow and keep their hands away from their nose, eyes, and mouth.
- Prevent your child from being exposed to second-hand smoke. This can cause cold-like symptoms.
- Keep childhood vaccinations current. This can help reduce your child's chances of ear infection.
- If you're pregnant or plan to be, get a flu shot to protect you and your baby.
- Breastfeed your baby to lower the chance for colds and ear infections.
- Help your child eat a healthy diet low in fat, with five helpings of fruits and vegetables each day.
- Encourage your child to be active for at least 60 minutes a day.

Home treatment

Rest, fluids, and time are the best treatments for colds and flu. Be extremely cautious about giving over-the-counter cough and cold medicines. Instead, try to:

- Give your child lots of fluids.
- Make sure your child gets plenty of rest. Stick to quiet activities.
- Give your child lots of love and attention.

Use cough and cold medicines with caution.

- Cough and cold medicines only treat the symptoms of the common cold such as runny nose, congestion, fever, aches, and irritability. They do not cure the cold. Children get better with time.
- Over-the-counter cold and cough medicines can be dangerous for young children. **Do not give any cough or cold products to children under 4 years of age.**
- Cough and cold medicines have not been proven to be effective in children. These products come in many different strengths. Too much medicine can have serious side effects.

Runny or stuffy nose

- **Bed:** Raise the head of the crib or bed about three to four inches.
- **Rubber bulb syringe:** Use a soft rubber bulb syringe to clear a stuffed nose for an infant or young child. Saline (salt water) nose drops will help loosen the mucus. Place three drops of warm water or saline nose drops in each nostril. After one minute use the rubber bulb syringe to suck out the mucus gently. Before putting the bulb syringe into the child's nose, squeeze the bulb to push the air out.
- **Steamy air:** Have your child breathe in cool mist from a vaporizer (using plain water only), or run a warm shower with the bathroom door closed and have your child sit in the bathroom to breathe in the steam.

Cough

- Use a humidifier filled with distilled water in your child's room. Do not add medication to the water in the humidifier.
- Honey can help quiet a cough for children older than 1 year. (Do not give honey to babies younger than 1 year, as it may be harmful.)

Soft throat

- If your child is able, encourage gargling with warm salt water twice a day.
- Drink extra fluids.
- For children over 4 years old, offer sugar-free or homemade juice popsicles.
- For children over 6 years old, you can give ice chips or hard sugar-free candy to suck, but beware of choking.
- Give acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil) for pain.

Fever, headache, and body aches

- A fever is the body's normal response to an infection, so fevers are common when a child has a cold or the flu.
- If your child is uncomfortable, you can give your child acetaminophen (any age) or ibuprofen (children older than 6 months). If your child is under 2 years old, see below. **Warning: Do not give aspirin to children or teens under 20 years old.**
- Keep your child's room comfortably cool and dress the child lightly.
- Sponging is *not* necessary to reduce fever and is not recommended, since it can make your child more uncomfortable. If you do decide to sponge your child, give acetaminophen or ibuprofen first, and stop if your child shivers. *Do not add rubbing alcohol to the water; it can be harmful if your child breathes it.*

How much acetaminophen (non-aspirin) infant drops should I give my child under 2 years old?

Give acetaminophen drops every 4 to 6 hours, *if instructed by a medical professional* (see chart below for dosage).

Baby's Weight	Amount of drops
6 to 11 lbs.	= 0.4 ml (40 mg)
12 to 17 lbs.	= 0.8 ml (80 mg)
18 to 23 lbs.	= 1.2 ml (120 mg)

How much ibuprofen infant drops should I give my child under 2 years old?

If instructed by a medical professional, give drops every 6 to 8 hours. Do not give more than 4 times per day. **Do not give ibuprofen to children younger than 6 months old.**

Baby's Weight	Amount of ibuprofen drops
12 to 17 lbs.	= 1 dropperful (1.25 ml)
18 to 23 lbs.	= 1½ dropperful (1.875 ml)

When is it OK to send my child to daycare or school?

Children may go to school if they are not contagious, do not have a fever, and their symptoms are mild. However, if your child feels ill, it is best for him or her to rest at home. Before your child returns, check the school's or daycare's guidelines. In general, keep your child at home if he or she:

- Has a contagious condition.
- Requires a lot of one-on-one attention or care from an adult.
- Lacks alertness to learn or play.
- Has a fever. See fever guidelines under "Call Kaiser Permanente."

Is my child eating enough?

It is normal for a sick child to have a poor appetite. Don't force your child to eat or stay in bed. Instead, offer your child lots of extra fluids (water, juice) and soft, easy to swallow foods, such as broth (chicken or beef), applesauce, oatmeal, Jell-O, mashed potatoes, frozen juice bars, popsicles (for children older than 4 years), or ice cream.

Call Kaiser Permanente if your child has . . .

Normal body temperature can range from 97° F to 100.4° F. A fever is the body's normal way to fight an infection. Call Kaiser Permanente if:

- Child 2 months or younger: Has a fever over 100.4° F.
- Child 3 months or older: Has a fever over 100.4° F and any of the symptoms below:
 - Trouble breathing, wheezing or tightness in the chest
 - A deep cough with lots of mucus
 - Vomiting, diarrhea or is dehydrated
 - Severe headache
 - Stiff neck
 - Very sore throat or trouble swallowing
 - Skin rash
 - Severe ear pain
 - Confusion, is listless, or has severe lack of energy
 - A bulging soft spot on his or her head
 - Gets better, then gets worse again

Other resources

Kaiser Permanente

kp.org/flu or visit your physician's home page at kp.org/mydoctor.

American Academy of Pediatrics
aap.org

Bright Futures
brightfutures.org



Visit your local Health Education Center or Department for more information.

*If you have an emergency medical condition, call 911 or go to the nearest hospital.

An emergency medical condition is (1) a medical or psychiatric condition that manifests itself by acute symptoms of sufficient severity (including severe pain) such that you could reasonably expect the absence of immediate medical attention to result in serious jeopardy to your health or body functions or organs; or (2) active labor when there isn't enough time for safe transfer to a Plan hospital (or designated hospital) before delivery, or if transfer poses a threat to your (or your unborn child's) health and safety.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your child's physician or other medical professional. If your child has persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your child's doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your child's medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.