

Let's Talk About...

Viral upper respiratory infections (URIs) or common colds

A viral **upper respiratory infection** (URI), also called a common cold, is a contagious illness that affects kids of all ages, especially during the winter months.

What causes a cold?

A cold is usually caused by a virus that passes through droplets in the air or on surfaces your child touches. Your child is more likely to get a cold when the air is dry, both inside and outside, because the virus is more likely to survive in this weather.

What are the signs of a cold?

Common signs of a cold include:

- A runny or stuffy nose
- An irritated or sore throat
- A cough
- A mild fever
- Headaches or muscle aches
- Mucus that turns yellow or green

How is a cold diagnosed?

Your child's healthcare provider will ask about your child's symptoms and will look at their throat and ears. They may take a sample of the saliva in your child's throat (called a culture) to test for other illnesses, like strep throat (a throat infection).

The healthcare provider probably won't be able to tell you which virus is causing your child's cold. The treatment is most important.



How is a cold treated?

There is no cure for a cold, and it will go away on its own without treatment. However, you can give your child ibuprofen (Advil) or acetaminophen (Tylenol) to relieve headaches and muscle aches. Having your child get lots of rest and drink plenty of fluids can also help them feel better. Hydration is very important.

If your child's healthcare provider says it's okay, you can give an older child an over-the-counter medicine to treat a sore throat and runny or stuffy nose.

Remember: Antibiotics do not treat viruses, so your child's healthcare provider should not prescribe them.

How long does a cold last?

A cold usually goes away on its own within a week, but it may last a bit longer.

How do I know if my child has a more serious illness?

If your child's symptoms seem to get worse after 3 days, they may have something more serious, like strep throat, sinusitis (a sinus infection), or a lung infection.

Your child may also have allergies if their symptoms last more than a week and seem to happen at the same time every year. Pets, certain fragrances, and dust or pollen in the air can also cause sneezing and a runny or stuffy nose.

How can my child prevent colds?

To prevent future colds, your child should:

- Wash their hands often and scrub well using soap and warm water for 20 to 30 seconds
- Stay away from other people who are sick
- Cough or sneeze into their elbow, not their hands, or use a tissue
- Eat healthy foods and get plenty of rest to boost their immune system (ability to fight infection)
- Not share toys, cups, towels, or eating utensils with someone who is sick

When should I call my child's healthcare provider?

Call your child's healthcare provider if your child's symptoms get worse and they:

- Are vomiting and can't keep food or liquids down
- Have a very sore throat that makes it hard to swallow
- Are coughing up mucus
- Have chest pain or trouble breathing
- Are unusually tired
- Have a fever higher than 101°F (38°C)
- Have an earache or swollen glands (lymph nodes) on their neck

Questions for my doctor

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