

Upper respiratory infections (colds)

What is an upper respiratory infection (URI)?

Commonly called a cold, a URI is an infection of the upper respiratory tract (nose, sinuses, throat). Most healthy children will get at least 6 colds per year.

What are the signs of a cold?

- sneezing
- stuffy nose
- runny nose
- coughing
- slight fever
- sore throat

What causes a cold?

Colds are caused by many different viruses. These viruses are easily spread, especially during the first few days, by:

- coughing, sneezing, laughing, or talking.
- touching things that have mucus on them or that have been in contact with it, and then touching your eyes, nose, or mouth.

Viruses do not respond to antibiotics. Most colds will go away by themselves in 5 to 7 days with rest and fluids.

How should I care for my child?

Babies normally breathe through their nose. With a stuffy nose, babies have trouble eating and sleeping, and can be irritable, restless, and anxious. (Older children breathe through the mouth if their nose is stuffy.)

Raise the humidity in your child's room by using a **cool** mist vaporizer. This helps thin the mucus in the airways and also makes a sore throat feel better. Clean the vaporizer daily, with Lysol® or bleach, to kill molds and germs. (**Note:** Too much moisture can lead to mold and bacteria in carpets, drapes, and heating systems. Keep the room's humidity under 50%.)

Raise the head of your child's bed to help prevent mucus buildup during sleep. Put a pillow under the mattress, or use props under the legs at the head end. Books or boards work well. **Keep crib rails up.**

Encourage extra fluids. Do not use sugar-free products unless directed by the doctor.

To reduce stuffy nose before feedings, at bedtime or nap time, or whenever needed, follow these steps:

1. Buy saline (salt water) nose drops at the pharmacy; no prescription is needed. Or make your own: stir ¼ teaspoon salt into ½ cup lukewarm water. Make new saline every day.

2. Lay the child on the back with a rolled towel under the shoulders to keep the head tilted back.
3. Put 1 or 2 drops of saline into each nostril. Wait 30 to 60 seconds to give the mucus time to thin.
4. Turn child onto the tummy and let the mucus drain out, or suction the nose with a bulb syringe as follows:
 - Squeeze air out of the bulb.
 - Gently place the tip of the bulb into the nostril.
 - Let air come back into the bulb. The suction will pull the mucus out of the nose.
 - Squeeze the mucus out of the bulb onto a tissue.
 - Suction the other nostril the same way. Gently wipe off the mucus around the nose to prevent skin irritation.

If your child protests, talk gently to soothe and reassure.

How can we prevent the spread of colds?

Frequent hand hygiene is the most important way to prevent the spread of colds. All family members should:

- wash hands well after blowing their nose and before touching or eating food.
- avoid touching their nose and eyes.
- not share food, beverages, or towels.
- cover their mouth with their forearm when they sneeze or cough.

Wash your baby's or toddler's hands often.



What else do I need to know?

Most over-the-counter cold remedies do not help. Nothing can shorten the length of a cold. Give acetaminophen (Tylenol® or another brand) only if your child also has a fever, sore throat, or muscle aches.

Antibiotics should not be given because they have no effect on viruses and may be harmful.

When should I call the clinic?

Call if your child:

- doesn't get better or looks sicker after 48 hours
- starts to have a harder time breathing
- breathes much faster than normal
- eats poorly or tires easily when feeding
- has a fever of 100.5° F (38° C) or higher, and is 6 months or younger
- has a fever of 100.5° F (38° C) that lasts for more than 3 days, and is older than 6 months
- pulls at the ears or shakes the head
- drinks less than usual

Questions?

This sheet is not specific to your child, but provides general information. If you have any questions, please call your clinic.

For more reading material about this and other health topics, please call or visit the Family Resource Center library, or visit our Web site: www.childrensmn.org.

Children's Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota
 Patient/Family Education
 2525 Chicago Avenue South
 Minneapolis, MN 55404
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