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Colds in Babies

What are colds?

A cold is an infection caused by a virus, The virus usually affects the nose and throat, and may affect the sinuses and ears. A cold can also affect the tube that connects the middle ear and throat, as well as the windpipe, voice box, and upper airways. Colds are also called upper respiratory infections.

In a young baby, the air passages through the nose and between the ear and throat are small. Mucus can block these small passages during a cold and cause trouble breathing. Most babies also don't eat well when it's hard for them to breathe.

What is the cause?

Many different viruses can cause colds. The infection spreads when viruses are passed between people by sneezing or coughing. Your baby may have caught the virus from another person or from touching something with the virus on it, such as a toy at day care.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include:

- Runny or stuffy nose
- Cough
- Mild fever
- Hoarseness, which may sound like a muffled cry
- Poor feeding

Symptoms usually start 1 to 3 days after contact with a cold virus and can last 1 to 2 weeks. Cold and flu symptoms are similar. The difference is that when your child has the flu, the symptoms start within a few hours. The symptoms of a cold develop more slowly.

How is it diagnosed?

Your child's healthcare provider will ask about your child's symptoms and medical history and examine your child. A sample of fluid from your child's nose or throat may be tested if your provider thinks something other than a cold is causing your child's symptoms.

How is it treated?

Antibiotics can kill bacteria, but not viruses. Colds are caused by viruses, so antibiotics do not help.

You can do nasal rinses to help clear your baby's air passages and help your child breathe.

- Put 1 or 2 drops of warm water or saline solution into each nostril, one nostril at a time.
- Gently remove the mucus with a bulb syringe about a minute later. A bulb syringe is a small rubber suction tool that you can buy in the baby section of most drug stores or grocery stores. Follow the directions on the package. Your healthcare provider can also show you how this is done.

You can buy saline solution or make your own by mixing 1/2 teaspoon salt with 1 cup of water.

How can I take care of my child?

Follow the full course of treatment prescribed by your healthcare provider. In addition:

- Use a humidifier to put more moisture in the air. Avoid steam vaporizers because they can cause burns. Be sure to keep the humidifier clean, as recommended in the manufacturer's instructions. It's important to keep bacteria and mold from growing in the water container.
- Give your child acetaminophen or ibuprofen for fever and pain relief. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicines (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen, naproxen, and aspirin, may cause stomach bleeding and other problems. Read the label and give as directed. Check with your healthcare provider before you give any medicine that contains aspirin or salicylates to a child or teen. This includes medicines like baby aspirin, some cold medicines, and Pepto-Bismol. Children and teens who take aspirin are at risk for a serious illness called Reye's syndrome. Acetaminophen may cause liver damage or other problems. Read the label carefully and give your child the correct dose as directed. Do not give more doses than directed. To make sure you don't give your child too much, check other medicines

your child takes to see if they also contain acetaminophen. Unless recommended by your healthcare provider, your child should not take this medicine for more than 5 days.

- Do not give cough medicines to children under the age of 4. If your child is between the ages of 4 and 6, ask your healthcare provider before giving cough medicine. For children over the age of 6, you can give cough medicines, but they have not been proven to be helpful. Honey has been shown to help coughs but should not be given to children under 1 year because of the risk of botulism.
- Keep your child away from smoke. Secondhand smoke from cigarettes, cigars, or pipes is very harmful to children.

Ask your provider:

- How long it will take your child to recover
- If there are activities your child should avoid and when your child can return to normal activities
- How to take care of your child at home
- What symptoms or problems you should watch for and what to do if your child has them

Make sure you know when your child should come back for a checkup. Keep all appointments for provider visits or tests.

How can I help prevent colds?

- The viruses that cause colds are spread from person to person, so try to avoid exposing your baby to people who have cold symptoms. Avoid crowded places like shopping malls or supermarkets, especially during the fall and winter months when many people have colds.
- Keeping hands clean can also help slow the spread of viruses. Ask people who touch your baby to wash their hands first.
- Keep surfaces clean--especially bedside tables, surfaces in the bathroom, and toys. Some viruses and bacteria can live 2 hours or more on surfaces like tables, doorknobs, and cribs. Wipe them down with a household disinfectant according to directions on the label.

When should I call my child's healthcare provider?

Call IMMEDIATELY if:

- Breathing becomes difficult or rapid.
- Your child starts acting very sick.

Call during office hours if:

- The fever lasts more than 3 days.
- The nose symptoms last more than 14 days.
- The eyes develop a yellow discharge.
- You can't unblock the nose enough for your infant to drink adequate fluids.
- You think your child may have an earache or sinus pain.
- Your child's sore throat last more than 5 days.
- You have other questions or concerns.
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