

# Coughs and Colds in Young Children

## What causes coughs and colds?

Most coughs and colds are caused by a virus infection. There are many different viruses which can infect the nose and throat. They are passed on by coughing and sneezing the virus into the air. An average primary school child has 6 to 8 coughs or colds per year. A child may have several coughs or colds one after the other, particularly during winter. A child who lives with smokers has an increased risk of developing coughs and colds.

## What are the symptoms of coughs and colds?

- The common symptoms are a cough and a runny nose. The cough is often worse at night. Coughing does not damage the lungs. A coughing child will not choke or stop breathing.
- In addition a child may have: a raised temperature (fever), a sore throat, headache, tiredness, and be off their food. Sometimes children vomit after a bout of coughing.
- A build up of mucus behind the eardrums may cause dulled hearing or mild earache.

## What are the treatments for coughs and colds?

There is no magic cure! The symptoms tend to be worse in the first 2-3 days, and then usually ease gradually over the next few days. An irritating cough may linger for up to 2-4 weeks after other symptoms have gone. Antibiotics do not kill viruses, so are of no use for common coughs and colds. Treatment aims to ease symptoms until they go. The most useful treatments are:

- **Give the child plenty to drink.**
- **Give paracetamol (Calpol, Disprol, Tixymol, etc)** to ease aches and pains, headaches, and fever. Ibuprofen is an alternative.

You can buy various other 'cold remedies' and 'cough mixtures' from pharmacies. There is little evidence that they do much good, but some people find them useful. Note: these remedies and mixtures often contain several ingredients. Some may make children sleepy (which may be useful at bedtime). Some contain a decongestant which may help to ease a bunged up nose. Some contain paracetamol, so be careful not to give more than the maximum dose of paracetamol if you are already giving the child paracetamol.

Another popular treatment for a bunged-up nose in a baby is to put a few drops of saline (salt water) into the nose just before feeds. Some people feel that this helps to clear the nose to make feeding easier, but there is little scientific evidence as to how well this works. You can buy saline drops from pharmacies.

## What symptoms should I look out for?

Most coughs and colds get better without complications. Sometimes a more serious 'secondary' bacterial infection develops from an initial virus infection. For example, an ear infection, pneumonia, etc. Symptoms to look out for include: wheeziness, persistent earache, fast breathing, difficulty breathing, persistent high temperatures, drowsiness, chest pains.

See a doctor if symptoms become worse or you have a concern about your child. Doctors are skilled at checking children over to rule out serious illness. They may not be able to prescribe anything more effective for a common cough or cold, but a check-over may be reassuring.