



Pediatric Clinic

Colds in Infants and Children

Updated By Paul Choate, MD & Tess Cox, PA-C, MAY 2013

## **CAUSES/CONTAGION**

Most colds are caused by a type of germ called a “rhino-virus.” There are over 120 different types of rhinoviruses. Babies and children can get one right after the other or two or three overlapping. Children who attend Daycare are often exposed to many types of rhinovirus and can stay sick for most of the year.

There are several other viruses that can cause the same symptoms, including the Flu (Influenza) and Enterovirus.

Most of these Viruses can live outside the human body on hands, skin, countertops, and other surfaces for many days or even weeks. They can also become airborne (from others coughing and sneezing and the germs can hang in the air until someone comes along and breathes them in. These Viruses can also enter the body through the mouth and the eyes.

**Viruses thrive** when the body temperature is lowered even a little bit. This is a good reason to make sure that babies and children wear hats, a couple of layers, and stay warm without sweating! We adults can tolerate colder temperatures and run around in our T-Shirts and shorts when it snows!

But babies and children CANNOT tolerate cold! If their body temperature lowers even a little bit, the viruses will attack and begin to make them sick. So, lightly bundle your baby and protect them from cold and wind if it’s less than 70 degrees outside.

Heat and cleansers can kill viruses, which is why hand washing and wiping down countertops, drawer and door handles with a cleansing wipe is so important. It can help keep the virus from being spread through touch. Also, wearing a mask with coughing or sneezing can help keep germs out of the air.

## **SYMPTOMS**

The symptoms of a “head cold” include cough, nasal congestion, sneezing and runny nose. Sometimes a low grade fever will occur (100.4 to 101)

Often, when babies and children get a lot of phlegm and mucous caught in their nose and upper airway, you can hear a “rattle” in their upper chest. Many people think this means that the cold has moved into the little one’s chest. But this may be

deceiving. WASHING OUT THE NOSTRILS with a little saline may alleviate this symptom.

## **DURATION AND TREATMENT**

Most colds will last for about **two weeks**.

There is **no cure** for the common cold. So, the best we can do is to provide supportive measures so babies and children do not suffer too much with their head cold. Those measure include:

- **We no longer use decongestants** in children less than 6 years of age for cold symptoms because of the side effects to the heart and the high risk of OVERDOSING which can lead to death. Over the counter medicines are very rarely helpful with symptoms and DO NOT cure the cold. Please consult your pediatrician before giving your child or baby any medications for ingredients and dosing assistance.
- **Using nasal saline** (artificial tears) **often** to wash out the nose and keep the airway clear is extremely important, especially here in Colorado where the air is very DRY.

Babies do not breathe through their mouth for several months. Until then, if their nose becomes clogged with thick mucous or secretions, they may not breathe well and their oxygen levels can go down.

So, it is very important for babies to have their nose rinsed out regularly, **especially prior to feeding**. That way they do not have to choose between breathing and swallowing!

- **Use a cool mist humidifier** within 4 feet of the bed or crib. The air in Colorado is so dry that children and babies lose moisture from their lungs every time they exhale! So, helping keep their little lungs moist can insure that their airways stay healthy. Using a humidifier is a good idea even when they are not sick.

If you don't have a humidifier, you can steam up the bathroom and allow the child to breathe the moist air. This can loosen and break up any thick, gooey phlegm in their nose or lungs and help them sneeze it out or cough it up. Sometimes babies will gag on the phlegm and vomit it up. Vomiting due to coughing is OK as long as it doesn't happen often.

- **Propping to sleep:** some babies or children will benefit from sleeping in their car seat, infant carrier, or being held upright against Parent's chest. Being upright helps keep the loosened secretions moving down so baby can swallow them. Many children will cough more when lying down because the phlegm pools in the back of their throat. Coughing in this

position can be so hard they vomit. Using the humidifier and nasal saline to loosen the secretions can help avoid that problem.

- The **natural color change of phlegm** with a cold will start out as clear or cloudy, then progress to green, then back to cloudy or clear by the end of the cold. If the phlegm begins to turn a thick yellow color (like pus) at around 10-14 days, then see your pediatrician.
- **Phlegm** draining down the throat **can cause a sore throat**. This may affect the child's feeding/eating. Soft, easy to swallow foods are helpful, and taking ibuprofen (for babies over 6 months) can decrease inflammation and pain.
- **If fever occurs**, it should be low grade (100.4 to 102°F) If fever goes higher and stays higher, use ibuprofen in children over age 6 months to help with lowering the fever. Ibuprofen can help decrease swelling in the nose and sinuses and also help relieve some congestion.

You may also wipe down the baby's skin with warm washcloth to cool the skin. We do NOT use alcohol baths any longer. **Do not allow the baby to become chilled**. Lower body temperature encourages the Virus to grow!

- Higher temperatures (102-105°F) MAY mean that the child has developed a bacterial infection on top of the Virus. Most ear infections are caused by viruses, but a higher fever can denote a bacterial ear infection has also developed. If fever persists beyond 12 HR, or is unresponsive to Acetaminophen or Ibuprofen, then see your medical provider.
- If going outside, be sure to cover the head, wear layers, and keep baby from becoming chilled. Older children should wear a mask if coughing or sneezing.

The common head cold differs from actual FLU. The term FLU actually stands for "Influenza, Type A or B." Flu symptoms include significant fever (101-105°F), sore throat, coughing, congestion, & aching all over.

**Influenza makes us much sicker than a common cold**. In fact, babies can die from Influenza, which is why it is so important for everyone who is in frequent contact with baby get their Flu shot, including other children in the family. See the "Influenza Patient Handout" in this section to update your knowledge about the FLU.

## **SUMMARY**

The most important points to remember about the Common Cold are:

- Low grade fever
- Lasts for 1-2 weeks
- Use saline and humidifiers to keep secretions loose and watery
- Higher persistent fevers or difficulty breathing should be evaluated by a medical provider.
- Tylenol is not helpful for cold symptoms other than fever, but **Ibuprofen** for children over 6 months of age may decrease swelling, fever, or pain. Consult your medical provider before starting any medications.