

## **UPPER RESPIRATORY INFECTIONS**

### **What is an Upper Respiratory Infection?**

An Upper Respiratory Infection (or URI) is an infection of the nose and throat caused by a virus. It is also known as the common cold.

Symptoms include a runny or stuffy nose, scratchy throat, clogged ears, headache, sinus pressure, watery eyes, fever, fatigue, and achiness. The nasal discharge may be clear, white, yellow, or green depending on the stage of the cold. The symptoms usually last 7-14 days.

### **Why do children get so many of these infections?**

There are over 200 different kinds of viruses that cause a URI. This is the main reason these infections are so common, and why we continue to get these infections even into adult life. Younger children tend to get the most colds because their immune system is inexperienced and has not yet developed the ability to fight these viruses. Some studies show that pre-school age children get 8-10 colds a year, school age children get 5 colds a year, and adults get 4 colds a year on average.

Children whose parents smoke get about 60% more colds compared to children whose parents do not smoke. Children who attend day care get up to 70% more colds than children who are cared for at home.

### **How can colds be prevented?**

There is no effective way to prevent your child from getting a cold. There are so many viruses and so many infected people that all of us get exposed to these germs, especially in the winter months. The germs are spread through tiny droplets in the air when an infected person sneezes or coughs and by contact with the mucous from an infected person's nose.

There are some things you can do to decrease the number of colds your child gets:

- Do not smoke or allow other people to smoke in your house. Cigarette smoke clogs up the body's defenses in the nose that keep cold germs out.
- If your child is in day care, try to choose a place where there are small groups of children or small classes in separate rooms.
- Encourage handwashing for both you and your child.
- Prevent the air in your house from becoming overly hot or dry during the winter months. Wood burning stoves often result in excessively dry air.

### **How should an URI be treated?**

Most URI's are self-limited viral infections. This means the body's own defenses will fight off the infection over a period of 7-14 days. During this time, your child will feel uncomfortable and seem cranky or tired, have a decreased appetite, have nasal congestion and a cough, and may have trouble sleeping.

To help your child fight the infection and feel more comfortable, here are some things to do:

- Provide adequate rest - allow your child to play quiet activities (board games, reading, video games, TV), allow time for extra naps. Rest allows the body to spend its energy on fighting the infection.
- Provide extra fluids - water, juice, or milk (breast milk or formula if your child is under 12 months of age) are best. For most children, milk does not make the congestion worse. If you feel that milk makes your child worse, stick to water and juice. Fluids liquefy the mucous so that it is easier to clear.
- Humidify the air - run a humidifier or vaporizer in the child's bedroom, sit in the bathroom with the shower running and let the room get steamy, put bowls of water in the bedroom and let the water evaporate, open a bedroom window slightly to let in the damper night air.

Moisture in the air allows the defenses in the nose to be more effective. If you use a vaporizer or humidifier, prevent mold growth by cleaning it regularly, following the manufacturer's recommendations. If you feel the extra humidity makes your child worse, stop using it.

- Elevate your child's head when sleeping - young infants may sleep more comfortably in an infant seat; the head of a crib can be elevated using a pillow under the mattress; extra pillows can be used for an older child.
- Provide extra TLC - comfort and reassure your child, let them know they will get better, give extra hugs.

### **What medications should be used to treat a cold?**

It is not necessary to use any medications. Despite advertising claims, no medication cures a cold or helps to significantly shorten its duration. Since a cold is caused by a virus, antibiotics are not helpful.

If your child is miserable and uncomfortable after using the recommendations above, try using a medication targeted at the symptom that is bothering the child. Here are some recommendations:

- Headache or achiness - use Acetaminophen (Tylenol) or Ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin)
- Nasal congestion - try Saline nose drops and/or a nasal aspirator; use the decongestant medication Pseudoephedrine (Sudafed and other brand names)
- Scratchy or dry throat - cough drops, honey and lemon in warm water, chamomile tea
- Cough - try the treatments for a scratchy throat along with humidity and head elevation.

If these measures are not enough and your child is over 2 years old, use Dextromethorphan, an over-the-counter, non-narcotic cough suppressant. One precaution: Dextromethorphan in excessive doses can produce a "high" feeling and is abused by teens.

Herbal medications and nutritional supplements (like Zinc) have not been studied well in children. The effectiveness, side effects, and dosages of these alternative treatments are not known and they are not recommended. One recent study on the effectiveness of Echinacea concluded that this product did not provide any benefit in the treatment of cold symptoms.

Multi-symptom cold and cough medications have multiple drugs in them - often 3 or 4 different medications. Using them results in giving your child unnecessary medications and increases the potential for side effects.

### **Could my child's cold symptoms be due to something more serious?**

Yes - if you are worried about your child, call and make an appointment so that your child can be evaluated.

Many illnesses can mimic cold symptoms - allergies, asthma, lower respiratory infections (like pneumonia). These should be evaluated in the doctor's office. Upper respiratory infections can lead to other infections like ear infections or sinus infections. These infections may need an antibiotic.

#### **Any of these symptoms warrant a trip to the doctor:**

- high fever (over 103)
- A sore throat or swollen glands in the neck
- Ear pain
- A stiff neck or severe headache
- Shortness of breath, wheezing, or trouble breathing
- Inability to drink
- Persistent vomiting
- Cold symptoms that last longer than 14 days