

### **What is it and what causes it?**

The common cold (or upper respiratory infection) is an infection caused by viruses. There are over 100 different kinds of viruses that cause colds. The germs attack the lining of the nose, throat and sometimes the lungs.

These viruses are picked up by direct contact with someone with a cold. Colds are spread by shaking hands. Although colds are not caught by going out in the cold or getting our feet wet, the common cold symptoms can worsen with such exposure. It is not unusual for children to have eight to 10 colds in the first two years of life. Children who are in child care or school may have even more colds because of the volume of children and the ease of the spread of germs in these environments.

Infants with colds are often fussy and restless. They may run fevers and sneeze, cough and have a runny nose.

Older children will often complain of a stuffy nose, sore throat and dry cough. As the mucous in the nose becomes thicker, they get congested in their throat and chest. Older children can run fevers too, but usually not very high.

Ear infections are common in children with colds or coughs. Babies with ear infections may rub or pull at their ears, have fever, fussiness, diarrhea and a poor appetite. Older children may complain about earache. Some children do not feel any discomfort.

### **Can colds be prevented?**

You can reduce your chances of getting or spreading colds by:

- washing hands often, yours and your child's, alcohol hand gels are particularly useful
- staying home when you are sick and avoiding persons who are sick. It is especially important to keep children under 3 months of age away from persons who are sick.
- eating healthfully.
- getting plenty of rest.

### **How are colds treated? How can I reduce the spread of cold germs?**

"Treat a cold and it will last a week. Don't treat it and it will last 7 days."

Antibiotics, like penicillin, do not kill viruses. There are things you can do to help your child feel more comfortable while he gets over his cold.

- For infants, keep the nose clear, especially during feedings. While at home, if mucous is thick, salt water nose drops can be used as often as needed (1/4 teaspoon salt mixed in a cup of warm water). Using a medicine dropper, squirt two salt water drops into each nostril while the baby's head is held back. Do this before feedings. A nasal bulb syringe, which is found in drug stores, can be used to draw out the mucous after using the nose drops. Wash your hands afterwards.

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- Encourage rest and limit activity, especially while the child is running a fever.
- Offer plenty of clear fluids to prevent dehydration, soothe sore throats and ease coughs.
- Avoid smoking in your home. Cigarette smoking may make colds worse or occur more often.
- If your child has a fever and is at least 6 months of age, you may give acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Read the label for the correct dosage. Do not give this medication to a child who is dehydrated or vomiting.
- Decongestants, antihistamines, cough and cold medications are available without prescription, however, do not give these medications to a child who is under 3 years of age unless prescribed by the child's health care provider. Some of them may cause unpleasant side effects in children like drowsiness, hyperactivity and restless sleep. Most colds will run their course in seven to 10 days with or without these medications.
- Hands should be washed often, but especially after wiping noses and covering coughs and sneezes.
- There are many vitamin and herbal remedies. None have been shown work and some (zinc) may be harmful.

#### **When should I call my health care provider?**

- When the child is less than 3 months of age and is showing the first signs of illness.
- When the child is older than 3 months of age and is experiencing noisy breathing with the widening of the nostrils with each breath, lips or nails turning blue, nasal mucous that lasts over 10 days, cough lasting more than one week, pain in the ear, temperature over 102 degrees, and/or is excessively sleepy or cranky.
- When you are uncertain about the child's symptoms or how his illness is progressing.

For more information contact Guilford County Department of Public Health at 641-7777 or [www.guilfordhealth.org](http://www.guilfordhealth.org)