

Common cold in children

What causes a cold?

A cold is a viral infection that affects the nose, throat and sinuses. While adults usually have two to four colds a year, children can catch as many as seven to 10.

Dr Rob Hicks, a GP in London, offers his advice on caring for children with colds.

Is my child's cold serious?

Colds aren't usually serious. However, babies, the elderly and anyone whose immune system is compromised can be at risk of developing more serious complications, such as a bacterial chest infection.

Read more about [spotting signs of serious illness in your baby](#).

What are the differences between adult and child colds?

Children contract colds far more often than adults. Cold symptoms in a child may include a [raised temperature \(fever\)](#).

When should I take my child to the doctor?

Most colds get better on their own without treatment. Seek medical advice if:

- a baby aged less than three months develops a fever higher than 38°C
- cold symptoms last for more than 10 days, particularly if your child is coughing up green, yellow or brown sputum or has a fever – this could be a sign of a bacterial infection that needs treatment with antibiotics
- your child is finding it difficult to breathe – seek medical help immediately from your surgery or local hospital
- your child complains of pain in the nasal passages after two to four days of home treatment
- your baby or child has, or seems to have, severe [ear ache](#) (babies with earache often rub their ears and seem irritable) as they could have an ear infection that may need antibiotic treatment
- your child complains of throat pain for longer than three or four days, or their throat pain seems unusually severe, as they may have bacterial tonsillitis that needs antibiotic treatment
- your child develops other symptoms such as pain or swelling in the face or in the chest, a headache or a very bad sore throat
- your child seems to be getting worse rather than better

Why won't my doctor prescribe antibiotics for my child's cold?

Antibiotics are used to treat infections caused by bacteria. Colds, however, are caused by viruses, which do not respond to antibiotics.

The overuse of antibiotics can lead to antibiotic resistance where symptoms don't respond to treatment with antibiotics. The doctor is likely to prescribe antibiotics only if your child has developed a bacterial infection secondary to (on top of) a cold.

Read more information about [antibiotic resistance](#).

Top tips for parents

The following tips may help your child cope with the symptoms of a cold.

- encourage your child to rest and make sure they drink plenty of fluids – water is fine but warm drinks can be soothing
- if they have a blocked nose you can make their breathing easier by raising the pillow end of your child's bed or cot by putting books or bricks under the legs or placing a pillow under the mattress (although you should not put anything under the mattress of a baby younger than one year old)
- paracetamol liquid or ibuprofen liquid can help ease a fever and pain – check the dosage instructions on the packaging and never give aspirin to children under 16 years old
- a warm, moist atmosphere can ease breathing if your child has a blocked nose – take your child into the bathroom and run a hot bath or shower or use a vaporiser to humidify the air
- keep the room aired and at a comfortable temperature, and don't let your child get too hot – if a small child or baby has a temperature let them wear just a nappy or underwear

How can I prevent a cold spreading?

You can take steps to help prevent the spread of a cold. For example:

- **wash your hands regularly and properly**, particularly after touching your nose or mouth and before handling food
- **always sneeze and cough into tissues** as this will help to prevent the virus-containing droplets from your nose and mouth entering the air where they can infect others; throw away used tissues immediately and wash your hands
- **clean surfaces regularly** to keep them free of germs
- **use your own cup, plates, cutlery and kitchen utensils**
- **use disposable paper towels to dry your hands and face**, rather than shared towels. As with tissues, always dispose of the paper towels after you have finished using them

