

COLDS/UPPER RESPIRATORY INFECTIONS (URI)

DEFINITION

- Runny or stuffy nose.
- Usually associated with fever and sore throat.
- Sometimes a cough, hoarseness, red eyes, and swollen lymph nodes in the neck.
- Also called an upper respiratory infection (URI).

Similar Conditions

1. *Vasomotor rhinitis*: Many children and adults have a profusely runny nose in the winter when they are breathing cold air. This usually clears within 15 minutes of coming indoors. It requires no treatment beyond a handkerchief and has nothing to do with infection.
2. *Chemical rhinitis*: Chemical rhinitis is a dry stuffy nose from excessive and prolonged use of vasoconstrictor nose drops (more than 1 week). It will be better within a day or two of stopping the nose drops.

Cause

A cold or URI is a viral infection of the nose and throat. The cold viruses are spread from one person to another by hand contact, coughing, and sneezing-not by cold air or drafts. Since there are up to 200 viruses, most healthy children get at least six colds a year.

Expected Course

Usually the fever lasts less than 3 days, and all nose and throat symptoms are gone by 1 week. A cough may last 2 to 3 weeks. The main things to watch for are secondary bacterial infections such as ear infections, yellow drainage from the eyes, sinus pressure or pain (often indicating a sinus infection), or difficulty breathing (often caused by pneumonia). In young infants, a blocked nose can interfere so much with the ability to suck that dehydration can occur.

HOME CARE

Not much can be done to affect how long a cold lasts. However, we can relieve many of the symptoms. Keep in mind that the treatment for a runny nose is quite different from the treatment for a stuffy nose.

Treatment for a runny nose with profuse discharge: Suctioning or blowing.

The best treatment is clearing the nose for a day or two. Sniffing and swallowing the secretions are probably better than blowing because blowing the nose can force the infection into the ears or sinuses. For younger babies, use a soft rubber suction bulb to remove the secretions gently.

Nasal discharge is the nose's way of eliminating viruses. Medicine is not helpful unless your child has a nasal allergy.

Treatment for a stuffy or blocked nose with dried yellow-green mucus.

Warm water or saline nose drops and suctioning (nasal washes). Most stuffy noses are blocked by dry mucus. Blowing the nose or suction alone cannot remove most dry secretions. Nose drops of warm tap water are better than any medicine you can buy for loosening mucus. If you prefer normal saline nose drops, mix ½ level teaspoon of table salt in 8 ounces of water or purchase over-the-counter nasal saline spray/drops. Make up a fresh solution every day and keep it in a clean bottle. Use a clean dropper to insert drops. Water can also be dripped or splashed in using a wet cotton ball.

- For the younger child who cannot blow their nose: Place 3 drops of warm water or saline in each nostril. After 1 minute, use a soft rubber suction bulb to suck out the loosened mucus gently. To remove secretions from the back of the nose, you will need to seal off both nasal openings completely with the tip of the suction bulb and your fingers. You can get a suction bulb at your drug store for about \$2.
- For the older child who can blow their nose: Use 3 drops as necessary in each nostril while your child is lying on their back on a bed with the head hanging over the side. Wait 1 minute for the water or saline to soften and loosen the dried mucus. Then have your child blow their nose. This can be repeated several times in a row for complete clearing of the nasal passages.
- Errors in using nose drops: The main errors are not putting in enough water or saline, not waiting long enough for secretions to loosen up, and not repeating the procedure until the breathing is easy. The front of the nose can look open while the back of the nose is all gummed up with dried mucus. Obviously, putting in nose drops without suctioning or blowing the nose afterward is of little value.
- Use nasal washes at least 4 times per day or whenever your child cannot breathe through the nose.

The importance of clearing the nose in young infants.

A child cannot breathe through the mouth and suck on something at the same time. If your child is breast- or bottle-feeding, you must clear his nose out so they can breathe while sucking. Clearing the nasal passages is also important before putting your child down to sleep.

Treatment for associated symptoms of colds.

- Fever/sore throat: Use acetaminophen or ibuprofen for aches or mild fever (over 102°F, or 38.9°C).
- Cough: Elevate head of bed; run a cool-mist humidifier.
- Poor appetite: Encourage fluids of the child's choice.

Prevention of colds.

A cold is caused by direct contact with someone who already has a cold. Over the years we are all exposed to many colds and develop some immunity to them. Complications from colds are more common in children during the first year of life. Try to avoid undue exposure of young babies to other children or adults with colds, day care nurseries, and church nurseries.

A humidifier prevents dry mucous membranes, which may be more susceptible to infections. Vitamin C, unfortunately, has not been shown to prevent or shorten colds. Large doses of vitamin C (for example, 2 grams) cause diarrhea.

Common mistakes in treating colds.

Most over-the-counter cold remedies or tablets are worthless. Nothing can make a cold last a shorter time. If the nose is really running, consider using a pure antihistamine if your child also has allergies. Especially avoid drugs that have several ingredients because there is a greater chance of side effects from these drugs. Avoid oral decongestants if they make your child jittery or keep him from sleeping at night. Use acetaminophen for a cold only if your child also has a fever, sore throat, or muscle aches. Do not give leftover antibiotics for uncomplicated colds because they have no effect on viruses and may be harmful.

Call our office immediately if:

- Breathing becomes difficult AND no better after you clear the nose.
- Your child starts acting very sick.

Call our office during office hours if:

- The fever lasts more than 3 days.
- The runny nose lasts more than 10 days.
- The eyes develop a yellow discharge.
- You can't unblock the nose enough for your infant to drink adequate fluids.
- You think your child may have an earache or sinus pain.
- Your child's throat becomes quite sore (get a throat culture).
- You have other questions or concerns.