

Health Tips for Parents

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Do cold and cough medicines work?

Most cold and cough symptoms will last seven to 10 days, with or without treatment, so don't expect a quick fix with medications.



Colds and coughs are often accompanied by a tickle in the throat, runny or stuffy nose, sneezing and/or congestion. Sore throat, fever and headache may or may not be present.



"Over-the-counter medications such as antihistamines, cough suppressants and decongestants may mask some cold and cough symptoms, but there has never been good evidence that they work," says Dennis Woo, MD, UCLA pediatrician. "Moreover, for children under 2, there is the added concern that we don't have reliable information about safe and proper dosages."

Research is still being conducted about the safety and effectiveness of these medications for children under the age of 12. The FDA currently recommends against the use of over-the-counter cough and cold medications for children under 6 years of age. Risk of adverse and potentially dangerous reactions, including

convulsions, increased heart rates and altered consciousness, are particularly high for the youngest children when they receive doses that are too potent or given too frequently.

Natural cold medications have become popular in the treatment of colds in children, but the safety and effectiveness of such medications have not been carefully studied.

Dr. Woo also notes that antibiotics, which fight bacteria, are not effective for treating colds, which are caused by viruses. In fact, overuse of antibiotics can lead to antibiotic resistance and reduced effectiveness when they are needed to fight a bacterial infection.

Further, OTC topical remedies that are rubbed into a child's chest may provide a soothing smell, but there is no evidence that this helps with cough or congestion. Dr. Woo notes that studies have shown over-dosage of this type of medication may lead to seizures in children under the age of 2.

Non-medication suggestions to alleviate symptoms

- Drink a lot of fluids
- Place cool-mist humidifier in room to increase air moisture
- Use bulb syringe to suck out any excess mucous (for children under 2 years)
- Sleep with head slightly elevated to improve nasal drainage
- Use saline drops in the nose to loosen mucous
- Use steam from a hot shower to help congestion
- Drink honey with tea (for children older than 1 year)



Rest is the best remedy

"Parents often feel helpless when their child is sick and turn to medications and antibiotics for a 'cure all'," Dr. Woo observes. "I firmly believe that we tend to overmedicate our kids in hopes that it will make them feel better faster, but nothing makes the cold go away faster than rest and letting the cold cure itself."

This information is provided courtesy of the pediatricians at Mattel Children's Hospital UCLA. UCLA Health System pediatricians are conveniently located in your neighborhood: Westwood, Brentwood, Manhattan Beach, Santa Monica and West Los Angeles. All health and health-related information contained in this publication is intended to be general in nature and should not be used as a substitute for a visit with a healthcare professional. **Subscribe to Health Tips for Parents at uclahealth.org/news.**