When to Give Kids Medicine for Coughs and Colds

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Although most colds in children don't cause serious complications, they can cause anxiety in parents and caregivers. And colds are among the top reasons children visit a doctor. Both non-prescription (over-the-counter) and prescription medicines are available to treat cough and cold symptoms. But most children will get better on their own and may not need medicine.

Some cough and cold medicines also have serious side effects, such as slowed breathing, which can be life-threatening, especially in infants and young children, so it's important to know when your child needs medication and when they can do without it.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration wants you to be aware of the following information about use of medicines for cough and colds in children:

- The FDA doesn't recommend over-the-counter (OTC) medicines for cough and cold symptoms in children younger than 2 years old.

- Prescription cough medicines containing codeine or hydrocodone **are not indicated for use in children younger than 18 years old (/Drugs/DrugSafety/ucm590435.htm)**. Codeine and hydrocodone are opioids that are available in combination with other medicines, such as antihistamines and decongestants, in prescription medicines to treat cough and symptoms associated with allergies or the common cold for adults.

- Caregivers should also read labels on OTC cough and cold products, because some might contain codeine.

Here are some other tips on how to safely treat your child's cough and cold.

Relieving Cold and Cough Symptoms

There's no cure for the common cold, a viral infection that can't be treated with antibiotics. Typically, a cold will run its course in a week or two, and children will usually get better on their own, without medication. For older children, some non-prescription medicines can help relieve the symptoms of a cold—but won't change the natural course of the cold or make it go away faster.

Coughs are a normal symptom of a cold and help the body clear the mucus out of the airway and protect the lungs. Non-drug treatments for coughs include drinking plenty of fluids, especially warm drinks to soothe the throat.

When to Call a Doctor

Not every sniffle or cough merits a trip to the doctor's office. When in doubt, parents should call their health care provider.

For all children, call a doctor if you see any of these symptoms:

- A fever in an infant 2 months or younger
- A fever of 102 degrees or higher at any age
- Blue lips
- Labored breathing, including nostrils widening with each breath, wheezing, fast breathing, the ribs showing with each breath or shortness of breath
- Not eating or drinking, with signs of dehydration (such as decreased urination)
- Excessive crankiness or sleepiness
- Persistent ear pain
- If the cough lasts for more than three weeks
- If the child is getting worse

These symptoms can signal that your child may have something more serious than a cold.

What to Do About Fever and Other Symptoms Associated With a Cold

Fever helps the body fight off an infection and does not always need to be treated. But if your child is uncomfortable because of fever or other symptoms of a cold, there are alternatives to cough and cold medicine to help them feel more comfortable. They include:

- A clean cool-mist vaporizer or humidifier in a small area near the child's bed can help moisten the air and decrease the drying of the nasal passages and throat.
- For infants with a stuffy nose, use saline or saltwater drops/spray to moisten nasal passages and loosen mucus. Then clean the nose with a bulb syringe or other suction tool designed for infants.

- Acetaminophen or ibuprofen can help reduce fever, aches and pains. Take care to use the correct dose, consulting a health care provider for patients younger than age 2.

Giving the Right Dose of Medicine

How can you be sure to give the correct dose? Follow the directions on the "**Drug Facts (/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/ucm143551.htm)**" label. The FDA encourages drug manufacturers to provide a dosing instrument, such as a syringe or a cup, marked with the correct measurements. Use them—and not household spoons or tools from other medications—to measure medication.

If you have questions, ask a pharmacist or your health care provider. They can tell you which dosing instrument to use, how much medication to give, and how often based on the Drug Facts label.

In the United States, adults average about three colds per year, and children have colds even more often. You might be tempted to give your children pain relievers, decongestants and other medications for a cold. But often it's best to fight this common childhood illness with rest and care, using medications only when the symptoms are too uncomfortable or make it difficult for the patient to breathe or sleep.

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