Upper Respiratory Infections

What is an upper respiratory infection (URI)?

Commonly called a cold, a URI is an infection of the upper respiratory tract (nose, sinuses, throat). Most healthy children will get at least 6 colds per year.

Signs of a Cold

- Sneezing
- Stuffy Nose
- Runny Nose
- Coughing
- Slight Fever
- Sore Throat

Causes of a Cold

Colds are caused by many different viruses. These virus are easily spread, especially during the first few days by:

- Coughing, sneezing, laughing, or talking
- Touching things that have mucus on them or that have been in contact with it and then touching your eyes, nose, or mouth

Viruses do not respond to antibiotics. Most colds will go away by themselves in 5 to 7 days with rest and fluids.

Caring for a Cold

Babies normally breathe through their nose. With stuffy noses, babies have trouble eating and sleeping, and can be irritable, restless, and anxious. Older children can adapt by breathing through their mouths.

Raise the humidity in your child's room by using a cool mist vaporizer. This helps thin the mucus in the airways and also makes a sore throat feel better. Clean the vaporizer daily, with bleach to kill molds and germs. (Note: too much moisture can lead to mold and bacteria in carpets and heating systems. Keep humidity under 50%)

Raise the head of your child's bed to help prevent mucus buildup during sleep. Put a pillow under the mattress or use props under the legs at the head end (like books or boards).

Encourage hydrating fluids like electrolyte drinks, milk, or broths.

To reduce stuffy nose before feedings, at bedtime or nap time, or whenever needed, follow these steps:

- Buy saline nose drops over the counter or make your own at home by mixing 1/4 tsp salt in a 1/2 cup of lukewarm water.
- Lay the child on their back with a rolled towel under the shoulders to keep the head tilted back.
- Put 1-2 drops of saline into each nostril. Wait 30-60 seconds to give the mucus time to thin.
- Turn the child onto their tummy and let the mucus drain out or suction the nose

Preventing the Spread of Colds

Frequent hand hygiene is the most important way to prevent the spread of colds. All family members should:

- Wash hands well after blowing their nose and before touching or eating food
- Avoid touching their nose or eyes
- Not share food, beverages, or towels
- Cover their mouth with their forearm when they sneeze or cough

Other Medications

Most over-the-counter cold remedies do not help. Nothing can shorten the length of a cold. Give acetaminophen only to treat discomfort with symptoms of fever, sore throat, or muscle aches. Antibiotics should not be given because they have no effect on viruses. Honey can be given to kids over 1 year of age and it may help with cough or sore throat.

When to Call

Call the clinic if your child:

- Does not get better or looks sicker after 2-3 days
- Starts to have a harder time breathing
- Eats poorly or tires easily when feeding
- Has a fever of 100.5 or higher and is 6 months or younger
- Has a fever of 100.5 that last for more than 3 days and is older than 6 months
- Pulls at their ear or shakes their head
- Drinks less than usual and you have concerns about dehydration

Questions?

This sheet provides general advice and is not specific for your individual child. If you have additional questions, you can send a message through your patient portal.