

Sniffles & Sneezes

A Parent's Guide to the
Cold Season



Children's
Hospital
Central California 

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What is an upper respiratory infection (URI)?

It is known as the “common cold”. If we were to count all of the people in the United States who will have cold symptoms in a single year, the number could be as high as *one billion*.

An URI is caused by a virus. There are over 200 cold viruses. A few cold viruses can cause more severe symptoms in babies and smaller children. One of the most common is RSV.

What is RSV?

RSV stands for Respiratory Syncytial Virus. It is a very common virus that causes cold symptoms in adults and children. It is the most frequent cause of a serious respiratory tract infection in infants and children younger than four years.

RSV is the virus that we hear about most often in children who are sick during the winter. There are many other cold viruses like rhinovirus, adenovirus and parainfluenza virus. Even though there are different cold viruses, they cause mostly the same symptoms in a child.

When is the cold season?

Colds are most common during the late fall to early spring but can happen any time of the year.

How easy is it to “catch” a cold?

A cold is a respiratory illness that is spread by contact with the virus. If someone coughs or sneezes, the virus can be spread by direct contact. Some cold viruses can live for several hours on surfaces like a countertop or a used tissue. Colds can spread quickly in crowded households, day care centers or schools. RSV is such a common virus that almost every child will have had it by the time they are three years old.

What are symptoms of the common cold?

A child will usually start showing symptoms one to three days after being in contact with someone with a cold virus.

Symptoms can include:

- Fussiness
- Runny nose
- Coughing
- Fast breathing
- Fever

Can a viral cold be serious?

Yes. Most often a cold is only a mild infection. Sometimes symptoms can quickly get worse and may become life threatening in very young children.

Many times children who have asthma, cardiac disease or were premature are at a higher risk of needing to go to the hospital because of a cold.

How do I know if my child needs to see the doctor?

You and your child's doctor or health care provider are partners in the care of your child. Call your doctor right away if your child has any breathing problems. *If you are unsure, it is best to call.*

How can I protect my child from RSV and other cold viruses?

- The best way to prevent RSV (or colds and many other illnesses including the flu) is to **wash your hands** regularly. Wash your hands with soap and water before touching your baby and ask others to do the same.

- Do not share food or drinks.
- Clean and disinfect household surfaces regularly.
- Use a tissue when you cough or sneeze and wash your hands after doing so.
- Keep your child away from anyone who has a cold. This includes other children. Remember that RSV is very common in young children and can be easily spread from one child to another.
- Remember that kissing a baby can spread a cold or flu virus.
- Stay away from crowds during the “cold” or “RSV” season.
- Keep healthy by getting enough sleep, eating healthy foods and exercising.
- Do not smoke near your baby. Being around tobacco smoke can increase the risk of viral disease.

Can an adult get RSV?

Yes. As with all cold viruses, anyone can get RSV – infants, children or adults. In some cases an adult might only have symptoms like a sore throat or cough. Even though the adult might not feel sick, a child can still catch a cold virus.

Can you get RSV again if you have had it before?

Yes, you can. Someone can have a cold virus like RSV and get it again. Most likely a second infection will be not as bad as the first.

How is a viral cold infection treated?

Most of the time infections can be treated at home. Medicines to help with the cough, fever and other symptoms can be used for the child with a mild infection. Check with your doctor

or health care provider to find out what kind of medicine and how much to give.

If the viral infection is severe, the child may need to be admitted to the hospital.

Will my child be given antibiotics for RSV?

There is no cure for the common cold. Antibiotics will not make RSV or any cold virus “get better”. Medicines can be used to help lessen the symptoms but they will not make the cold go away any faster.

Should I give my child cough medicine?

Have you noticed you can no longer buy “baby” cough medicine at the store? In the fall of 2007 many companies agreed to stop making them. *Why?*

In 2005 it was found that three babies who had suddenly died had high levels of pseudoephedrine (a medicine to decrease nose stuffiness), up to 14 times the amount suggested for children ages 2 to 12.

In the next two years further studies were done. These led the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to recommend **NO over-the-counter cough and cold medicines for babies and children under the age of two. The FDA also strongly discourages their use for children 2 to 6 years old.**

Because a cough can mean different things, parents should discuss their child’s cough with their health care provider. If a cough isn’t severe, fluids and a humidifier in the child’s room can help calm the cough.

This information covers only basic facts about RSV and other virus infections. Be sure to talk with your doctor or health care provider about all your baby or child’s needs.

Each year Children’s Hospital Central California has an increase in the number of patients treated for viral respiratory illnesses in the fall. Some of these viruses can cause severe complications in children who may already have other health problems. It is necessary to restrict visiting to the hospital during peak “cold season” months. From mid December through the end of March (actual dates may vary), children 12 years old and younger are not allowed to visit the hospital in patient care areas. We regret any inconvenience this may cause. However, this action is necessary to protect the health of your family, staff and the well being of hospitalized children.

If you do not have a doctor for your child, call the Children’s Hospital Pediatric Referral Service.
559.353.7349
Monday through Friday
8 a.m. to 5 p.m.



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9300 Valley Children’s Place
Madera, CA 93636-8762
T: 559.353.3000
www.childrenscentralcal.org