

Is This a Cold?

Many parents bring their child into my office to find out if their child has a cold, allergies or some other illness causing the child to cough and have a runny nose. What exactly is a cold? Who gets them and how are they spread? How many times a year can a person get a cold?

A cold, or upper respiratory infection, is caused by a virus. There are over 200 different viruses that can cause a cold. With all the different viruses that cause colds, most healthy children will get at least 6 colds a year! Colds are more common with the start of school and winter months, however they occur all year long.

Symptoms can include a runny or stuffy nose, fever, sore throat, sometimes a cough or hoarse voice, red eyes and lymph node swelling in the neck. The symptoms usually last 10-14 days before clearing. The fever may only last 2-4 days, the runny nose/congestion up to 2 weeks, but the cough can last 3 weeks in some cases!

A cold virus is spread by direct contact (shaking someone's hand) or through breathing respiratory droplets spread by a cough or sneeze. Yes, your mother was right to teach you to cover your mouth before coughing or sneezing! I have taught my children to bring their arm/elbow area up to their mouths to cover the cough and to wash their hands thoroughly after coughing or sneezing.

Viruses are not responsive to antibiotics, so there is no treatment for making a cold go away. There are medicines to make the symptoms improve (anti-fever medicines, decongestants, etc), but the body's natural immune system is the best and only defense against the cold. Some people advocate giving large doses of vitamin C to help fight a cold, but unfortunately, there are no studies thus far that have proven this works. Large doses of vitamin C can actually cause diarrhea.

About 5-10% of colds can develop into secondary bacterial infections like ear infections, sinusitis or pneumonia. Your child will begin to have other symptoms if this happens—watch for ear pain, trouble breathing or sinus area headaches. The color of the nasal discharge does NOT mean your child needs antibiotics—the body produces all different colors of mucus (clear, yellow or green) in response to a virus.

Colds are a part of life and are not serious—they are usually just an inconvenience! With time and patience, the majority of colds will go away within 10-14 days. Good luck with your child's 6 (or more) colds this year and remember that every cold they get strengthens their immune system in the long run. - *Jill Airola, MD*