

# Common cold

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## Description

Colds are the most common cause of illness in children and adults. There are more than 200 types of viruses that can cause the common cold. Symptoms include a runny or blocked nose, sneezing and coughing, watery eyes, headache, a mild sore throat and possibly a slight fever. Nasal discharge may start clear, but can become thicker and turn yellow or green over a day or so. Up to a quarter of young children with a cold may have an ear infection as well, but this happens less often as the child grows older. Watch for any new or more severe symptoms—these may indicate other, more serious infections.

Infants are protected from colds for about the first 6 months of life by antibodies from their mothers. After this, infants and young children are very susceptible to colds because they are not immune, they have close contact with adults and other children, they cannot practise good personal hygiene, and their smaller nose and ear passages are easily blocked.

It is not unusual for children to have five or more colds a year, and children in education and care services may have as many as 8–12 colds a year. As children get older, and as they are exposed to greater numbers of children, they get fewer colds each year because of increased immunity. By 3 years of age, children who have been in group care since infancy have the same number of colds, or fewer, as children who are cared for only at home.<sup>29</sup>

## How does it spread?

Colds spread by airborne droplets. They can also spread indirectly by contact with surfaces that have been contaminated by infectious airborne droplets (e.g. hands, tissues, toys, eating utensils).

## Incubation period

The incubation period is about 1–3 days.

## Infectious period

People with colds are most infectious from about 1 day before symptoms begin, and while they have a runny nose with clear nasal discharge.

## Exclusion period

There is no need to exclude a child with a common cold.

## Responsibilities of educators and other staff

- Advise the parent to keep the child home until they are feeling well.
- If an educator or other staff member has a cold, they should stay home until they are feeling well.
- Make sure staff and children practise cough and sneeze etiquette and effective hand hygiene.
- Ensure that appropriate cleaning practices are being followed in the education and care service.

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<sup>29</sup> Aronson, SS & Shope, TR (eds) 2005, *Managing infectious diseases in child care and schools: a quick reference guide*, American Academy of Pediatrics, Illinois.

## Responsibilities of parents

- Keep the child at home until they are feeling well.
- Encourage cough and sneeze etiquette and hand hygiene at home.
- Avoid contact between your child and other children, or frail and elderly people, until they are feeling well.

## Controlling the spread of infection

- Teach children about cough and sneeze etiquette.
  - Cough or sneeze into your inner elbow rather than your hand.
  - If you used a tissue to cover your nose or mouth when sneezing or coughing, put the tissue in the bin straight away.
  - Clean your hands.
- Ensure that staff practise cough and sneeze etiquette and hand hygiene, as above.
- Avoid contact between the person who is ill and children, or frail and elderly people, until the person is feeling well.

## Treatment

There is no specific treatment for the common cold. Because colds are caused by viruses, antibiotics will not help. Rest, extra drinks and comforting are important.

Decongestants and other cold remedies are widely promoted for relieving the symptoms of colds, but they are unlikely to help. In fact, they can cause side effects such as irritability, confusion and sleepiness. Oral decongestants are not recommended for children under the age of 2 years. Cough medicines do not reduce the frequency, severity or duration of a cough. The cough is there for a reason: it serves a useful function in clearing mucus from the child's airways and preventing secondary infection. If you are concerned, take the child to a doctor.

Do not give aspirin to any child under the age of 12 years unless specifically recommended by a doctor.