

## Fever and Cough in Children: How to Help Your Child

**November 2022 update:** Cough and cold season is here. You may be reading in the news about RSV and other viruses that are making many children sick with cough and fever, and you may have lots of questions and worries. Read this handout to see how you can help your child feel better.

### What are the cough and cold viruses that are making children sick?

There are several viruses (germs) that cause fever, cough and the common cold. These viruses are spread easily between children at home, day care and school. The viruses we are seeing now include RSV, rhinovirus, COVID and influenza (flu). These viruses make children sick with fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose, nose mucous and congestion, tiredness, and loss of appetite. These viruses can make some children have wheezing and shortness of breath. ***Most children can be cared for at home and do not need to see a doctor.***

Flu and other cough and cold viruses can cause **croup** (hoarse voice, barky cough, loud breathing and shortness of breath often in the middle of the night), **pneumonia** (fever, fast breathing, extreme tiredness) and **bronchiolitis** (wheezing and shortness of breath). Tell your doctor if your child has these symptoms.

### What is influenza?

Influenza (or the 'flu') usually begins with sudden fever, chills, headache, muscle aches, tiredness, dry cough and sore throat. Loss of appetite is common. Children with the flu feel very sick and want to stay in bed.

Although children with the flu may feel the same as adults, there are some differences:

- Newborns and young infants may only have fever.
- Young children may have fever seizures (convulsions).
- Stomach upset, vomiting, diarrhea and abdominal (stomach) pain are more common in younger children.
- Some children may have muscle swelling with leg pains and difficulty walking.
- Most healthy children recover from the flu without any serious problems. However, fever can last about one week (5-7 days), and cough, tiredness, and loss of appetite may go on for 1 to 2 weeks or more.

### Contact your doctor if during working hours, or take your child to an urgent care or emergency department if your child:

- is less than 3 months old and has a temperature of 38.0°C or more (armpit digital thermometer);
- has trouble breathing or fast breathing when resting, is wheezing, has chest pain when breathing or is coughing up bloody sputum (phlegm or saliva);
- is showing signs of dehydration (fewer than 3 wet diapers in 24 hours, increased thirst, no tears, dry skin, mouth and tongue, faster heart beat, sunken eyes, grayish skin, sunken soft spot (fontanelle) on baby's head);
- is constantly irritable and will not calm down, even after medicine for pain and fever (Tylenol or Advil);
- is listless, not interested in playing with toys or unusually sleepy; or
- still has a fever and is not feeling better after 5 days or was feeling better and suddenly develops fever;

- has cough and fever and: has lung or heart disease, has an illness or is taking treatment that affects the immune system, takes acetylsalicylic acid (ASA or Aspirin) regularly for a medical condition or has any other chronic illness requiring regular medical care.

**Take your child immediately to a hospital emergency department or call 911 if your child:**

- has severe trouble breathing or blue lips;
- is limp or unable to move;
- is hard to wake up or does not respond;
- has a stiff neck or severe headache;
- seems confused; or
- has a seizure (convulsion/fit).

**Treating fever and cough: What parents can do**

- **Rest:** Your child will want to sleep more. Use light clothing and keep the room temperature around 21°C.
- **Fluids:** Offer cool fluids often. If your child's urine (pee) is darker than usual they need to drink more. Your child may not want to eat. Juice, smoothies and popsicles can make them feel better. Offer small, healthy snacks if your child is not hungry.
- **Fever:** For pain, muscle aches or fever, use acetaminophen (Tylenol, Tempra) or Ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin). Use the amount on the package or recommended by your doctor or pharmacist. Do not give ASA (aspirin) to children or teenagers with influenza because it can lead to brain and liver damage (Reye syndrome). **For information about the shortage of these medications ask your pharmacist or read this handout:**  
<https://sharedhealthmb.ca/files/news-tylenol-advil-shortages-08-29-22.pdf>
- **Nose suction:** If your baby is having trouble feeding because of a stuffed nose, use a rubber suction bulb to clear the mucus. Use saline nose drops or saline nose spray if the mucus is very thick.
- **Humidifier:** A cool mist humidifier can make a child with a stuffed nose more comfortable. Clean and dry the humidifier thoroughly to prevent bacterial or mould contamination. Hot water vaporizers are not recommended because they can cause burns.
- **When antibiotics should be used:** Young children or children with medical conditions may benefit from a prescription for influenza (oseltamivir/Tamiflu). Antibiotics should be used only when children develop infections, such as ear infection or pneumonia.
- **Cough medicines:** 'Over-the-counter' cough and cold medicines (which do not need a doctor's prescription) should not be given to children younger than 6 years of age unless prescribed by your doctor.

**The Flu Shot and what parents can do to prevent spreading cough and cold viruses**

- **Hand washing** is the most important way to reduce the spread of flu, RSV, COVID and other respiratory viruses. **Wear a mask. Stay home** when you are sick.
- Children 6 months to 23 months of age and older children with chronic health conditions should get a **flu shot** every year. Parents, older siblings, others living in the home, and caregivers of children younger than 2 years of age should also receive the flu shot.

**Return to daycare/school**

- Keep your child at home, away from daycare or school, until the fever is gone and your child is feeling better. If your child has COVID or suspected COVID or influenza, stay home for at least 5 days.