

Colds, coughs and other viral infections in children

Children can pick up viral infections such as cold and flu more easily than adults. This is because their immune system is still developing. A viral infection is an infection caused by a virus (germ).

Common viral infections in children include:

- [respiratory syncytial virus \(RSV\)](#)
- [bronchiolitis](#)
- [common colds](#)
- [coughs](#)
- [flu](#)
- [croup](#)
- [COVID-19](#)

They also include:

- [winter vomiting bug \(norovirus\)](#)
- [chickenpox](#)

Preventing colds, RSV and other viruses

There are ways to avoid getting or spreading a virus. You can teach older children to do some of these themselves.

Do

- ✓ cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze
- ✓ put used tissues in the bin and wash your hands after - if you do not have a tissue cough or sneeze into your bent elbow
- ✓ [wash your hands properly and regularly](#)
- ✓ keep your child home if they are not well
- ✓ wash your hands before contact with a newborn baby

- ✓ keep your child up to date with [childhood vaccines](#)
- ✓ make sure your child gets the [nasal flu vaccine](#)

Don't

- ✗ do not share cutlery, drinks bottles, cups or glasses
- ✗ do not touch your eyes or nose when you are not well
- ✗ do not kiss or cuddle a newborn baby if you have a cold
- ✗ do not have close contact with people who have cold or flu symptoms
- ✗ do not have close contact with people more at risk of picking up viruses, if your child is not well

Some parents teach older children to 'dab' when they sneeze. Dabbing is a dance move in which a child drops their head into their bent elbow. This can be a fun way for your child to learn good hygiene when sneezing.

Treating viral infections at home

You can usually treat a child with a viral infection at home. Keep them home if they are not well enough to go to school or preschool.

If your child is older than 6 months and has a high temperature, you can usually [look after your child at home](#).

Ask your pharmacist for advice on medicines.

Trust your instincts - take your child to your GP if you are worried about them.

Get an urgent GP appointment if your child:

- is under 3 months and has a temperature of 38 degrees Celsius or higher
- is age 3 to 6 months and has a temperature of 38.5 degrees Celsius or higher

Call 112 or 999 if:

- your child finds it hard to breathe

Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)

RSV is a common virus that causes coughs and colds every winter. Most symptoms are mild and clear up within 2 to 3 weeks without treatment.

But RSV can be serious for:

- babies under 1
- children age 1 to 4
- people with a weak immune system
- adults age 65 and older

Protect people at risk of RSV by following the advice on [preventing the spread of viral infections](#).

Most people find out they have a condition caused by RSV when they are in hospital for treatment.

RSV immunisation has been introduced for newborn babies. This will help protect them from RSV over winter months.

[RSV immunisation for newborns](#)

RSV symptoms

Symptoms of an RSV infection can start with a:

- runny nose
- [temperature of 38 degrees Celsius or higher](#)
- cough
- sore throat

After 3 to 4 days, the RSV virus can cause bronchiolitis in babies and young children.

[RSV - a common virus that causes coughs and colds](#)

Bronchiolitis

Bronchiolitis is a common chest infection in babies and young children under 2. It most often affects babies under 6 months. It usually begins like a cold.

Most cases are mild and clear up within 2 to 3 weeks without treatment.

Contact your GP or a GP out-of-hours service if you are worried about their symptoms or symptoms get worse.

Find a GP out of hours

Symptoms of bronchiolitis include:

- increased breathing (more breaths per minute)
- wheezing
- not feeding or poor appetite
- less wet nappies

[Bronchiolitis - diagnosis and treatment](#)

Children's colds

It's normal for a child to have 6 or more colds a year. There are hundreds of cold viruses. Young children have no immunity to any of them as they have never had them before.

Over time they build up immunity and get fewer colds.

Colds usually start with a sore throat. Then your child might start sneezing or get a blocked or runny nose. They may also get a cough and not feel well.

[Common cold - symptoms and causes](#)

Treating a cold at home

You can usually treat a child with a cold at home. Most times you will not need to go to your GP. Talk to your pharmacist instead.

Ask them about giving your child ibuprofen or [liquid paracetamol](#).

These can help manage:

- pain
- [a high temperature of 38 degrees Celsius or higher](#)

Saline drops or nasal sprays can help if their nose is blocked.

Get your family to wash their hands regularly to stop the cold spreading.

Cough and cold remedies for children

Do not give cough or cold remedies to a child under 6, unless your GP or pharmacist tells you to. These include decongestants to clear a blocked nose.

If your child is over 6, your pharmacist might suggest a cough medicine.

Supplements for children

There is no evidence that giving your child garlic or vitamin C will help them to recover from a cold.

But if your baby is under 12 months, make sure you are giving them a [Vitamin D supplement](#).

Do not give the herbal remedy echinacea to children under 12. It's not clear if it is safe for young children.

Recovering from a cold

Most colds get better in 5 to 7 days, but can take up to 3 weeks in young children.

Keep your child at home if they are not well.

Wait until:

- they are feeling better
- they are eating and drinking as normal
- their temperature is back to normal - under 38 degrees Celsius

Children's coughs

Children often cough when they have a cold. This is usually caused by mucus trickling down the back of their throat.

A cough is not usually anything to worry about if your child eats and drinks as usual and is not wheezing.

It's upsetting to hear your child cough. But coughing helps clear away phlegm from the chest or mucus from the back of the throat.

Treating a cough at home

If your child is over the age of 1, they can try taking a warm drink of lemon and honey.

To make a warm lemon and honey drink at home, you need to:

- squeeze half a lemon into a mug of boiled water
- add 1 to 2 teaspoons of honey

Let the drink cool and give it to your child when it's still warm but not hot (never give hot drinks to small children).

Most coughs do not need an antibiotic. This is because coughs are usually caused by viruses. Antibiotics cannot treat viruses. Your child's body will fight the virus itself.

Contact your GP if your child is:

- not better after 3 weeks
- short of breath or seems to be having difficulty breathing
- very distressed by the cough
- not drinking as much as usual
- awake and coughing a lot at night
- asthmatic or has any chronic heart or lung conditions or a weak immune system

 [Find a GP](#)

Asthma symptoms

Bring your child to your GP if their cough:

- continues for a long time and is worse at night
- starts when they run around

Your GP may want to check your child for conditions like asthma. Asthma often runs in families. Tell your GP if there are others in your family with [asthma](#).

Call 112 or 999 if:

- your child finds it hard to breathe

Flu

A cold or a cough can be a symptom of [flu](#).

If your child has other flu symptoms, keep them at home for at least 5 days after their symptoms began.

Other symptoms include:

- [a high temperature of 38 degrees Celsius or higher](#)
- aches and pains
- tiredness
- sore throat
- headaches

Flu vaccine

Children age 2 to 12 can get the [nasal flu vaccine for free](#).

The flu vaccine will help protect your child against flu and reduce the spread of flu to others. For example, their brothers and sisters, parents and grandparents.

Croup

A child with croup has a distinctive barking cough. They will make a harsh sound called stridor when they breathe in.

They may also have a runny nose, sore throat and high temperature.


Your GP can diagnose croup.

[Croup in babies and children](#)

Call 112 or 999 or go to your nearest emergency department (ED) if your child has:

- severe symptoms of croup
- finds it hard to breathe

They will need urgent treatment in hospital.

 [Find an emergency department](#)

Winter vomiting bug (norovirus)

The winter vomiting bug is caused by a germ called norovirus. You can get a norovirus infection at any time of the year. But it's more common in winter.

Your child may not show symptoms for 1 or 2 days after picking up the virus. They may become sick quite suddenly.

Symptoms usually last for 2 to 3 days and can include:

- projectile vomiting (vomiting forcefully)
- diarrhoea
- [a high temperature of 38 degrees Celsius or higher](#)
- stomach cramps
- muscle aches
- pains

[Winter vomiting bug \(norovirus\)](#)

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