Colds in children

Wharowharo ki ngā tamariki

Colds are caused by germs (viruses) infecting the nose, sinuses, mouth, throat and voice box (upper airways). There are hundreds of different cold viruses, which spread through the air when a person sneezes or coughs. Droplets from sneezes or coughs also settle on surfaces. You may get infected by the virus if you touch those surfaces then touch your mouth, nose or eyes.

On average, tamariki (children) catch a cold three to eight times a year. Colds tend to happen more frequently in the colder months. Tamariki tend to get fewer colds as they get older because they build up immunity to some of the viruses that can cause colds.

Symptoms of colds in children

Cold symptoms usually last one to two weeks, though they're worse in the first two or three days. The cough that goes with a cold can last up to four weeks. The image over the page shows how many tamariki still have symptoms after five or 10 days.

If your tamaiti (child) has a cold, they'll have some or all of these symptoms:
▪ a runny or blocked nose
▪ watery eyes
▪ sneezing
▪ an itchy or sore throat
▪ a cough
▪ a hoarse voice
▪ a mild fever.

A tamaiti with a cold might also have mild body aches, mild headaches and less energy than usual.

While their immune system is fighting the cold, you'll notice some changes in their symptoms:
▪ the mucus from their nose may get thicker and may become yellow or green
▪ their cough may start to sound wet
▪ they may cough up mucus (phlegm) that's first white or clear, but then pale green or yellow.

These changes are normal. They don’t mean they needs antibiotics.
Helping your child with a cold

Medicines can't cure colds.

Antibiotics won't treat a cold and may cause side effects such as diarrhoea (the runs), thrush and tummy aches. Giving antibiotics to a tamaiti when they don't need them makes it more likely they'll develop a bacterial infection that's resistant to antibiotics. This could make it difficult to treat any bacterial infections they get.

The best ways to treat your tamaiti for a cold are:

- Ensure they get plenty of rest.
- Make sure they drink lots of fluids such as water.
- Give them paracetamol to help relieve pain, fever or discomfort. Carefully follow the instructions on the label about how much medicine to give them and how often. Check with your pharmacist or general practice team.
- Saline nasal drops or spray can help relieve a stuffy nose. Ask your pharmacist or general practice team about them.
Traditional vapour rubs to relieve congestion shouldn't be used in pēpi (babies) or tamariki as they can cause airway irritation and breathing distress.

Always read the directions on the label of any medication. Speak to your pharmacist or general practice team if you aren't sure.

**Getting help for your child with a cold**

Most colds get better within one to two weeks. Most tamariki don't need to see a nurse or doctor. But you should take them to see a doctor if they:

- are less than 3 months old and have a fever
- are short of breath (they look puffed), are breathing noisily or their ribs show more than normal when they breathe
- are coughing up a lot of mucus or are coughing for a long time without taking a breath
- can't keep food or liquid down, are drinking less than half their normal amount or aren't weeing much
- are unusually tired or lacking energy
- have a rash (spots on their skin)
- have pain anywhere that's getting worse even though you've given them paracetamol
- have had a fever for three days and it isn't getting better
- have had a wet-sounding cough for four weeks or have had a cold for four weeks and still aren't getting better.

You should also take them to a doctor if they have a sore throat and are Māori or Pasifika or prone to strep throat infections. Strep throat needs to be treated with antibiotics to help to prevent rheumatic fever.

**Preventing colds**

Unlike influenza (flu), there's no vaccination for colds because they're caused by many different viruses.

You can help your tamariki avoid colds by teaching them to avoid sharing cups, drink bottles or anything they eat or drink with, and to wash their hands before eating or preparing food. They should also wash their hands after they've touched their face.

Teach them to cover their mouth and nose with a tissue or their arm (but not their hand) when they sneeze or cough and then to wash their hands afterwards.

Keeping your home warm and dry and being smokefree also help to stop your tamariki from getting colds.

*Written by HealthInfo clinical advisers. Last reviewed November 2021.*