



Viral Infections “Cold”

Prepared for you by Branson Clinic, LLC

(Revised January 17, 2008)

An upper respiratory infection or “cold” is a viral infection that affects the nose, sinuses, throat and upper airways. Healthy children under the age of 6 average 6-8 colds each year. Most of these occur from September through April and last 14 days. So, it is not uncommon for your child to have symptoms essentially the whole winter.

What is a Viral Infection?

There are over 100 different varieties of viruses. This is why we see children getting new colds over and over again. The symptoms are pretty much the same, but the virus causing the illness is different. This is why it often seems your child has been sick month after month and not getting better. What is usually happening is that they are simply getting another one of their many expected viral illnesses for the year.

What are the Symptoms of an Upper Respiratory Infection?

Symptoms may include fever (not lasting more than 3 days), nasal congestion, runny nose, sneezing, sore throat and cough. Again, the fever should not last longer than 3 days. The rest of the symptoms may last about 7-10 days. Finally, the cough can persist for up to 2-3 weeks after the other symptoms have gone away.

How do children get Infected with a Virus?

Viruses can be obtained in many ways. When someone has a cold they have the virus particles on their hands. These viruses will live for at least 2 hours. If a person with a cold touches your child the virus is placed on your child’s body. If your child then touches his/her eyes, nostrils or mouth, the particles enter the body and potentially cause illness.

Some cold viruses can survive on doorknobs, toys and other surfaces for several hours. If your child comes into contact with these surfaces they can get infected just as above.

Your child can also get a cold by breathing in viral particles that another infected person has placed in the air by breathing out, coughing or sneezing.

How do children *Not* get viruses?

Most cold viruses are not found in the saliva. Therefore, kissing is not a likely way to spread the common cold.

Exposure to cold air does not cause a viral infection. Some viruses are more prevalent in the winter and children tend to be indoors in closer contact with each other in the winter. This is why they seem to be associated with the cold weather.

What can be done to Treat my child?

Antibiotics do not treat colds and will only cause unwanted side effects. Your child's immune system is what will fight the virus and get them through the illness.

Until your child is older than 6 months, it is best not to give any medicines. If your child has a persistent fever, difficulty breathing in the chest, is not taking fluids well or you have concerns, they should be seen prior to treating them with over the counter medicines at home.

In general, Tylenol or Ibuprofen for aches and pains with lots of rest and fluids will help your child get better the fastest. Nasal saline and a humidifier can be beneficial as well. Experts do not recommend cold medicines in children because they have not been studied and have never been proven to help. There have been cases of deaths in infants and children from over-the-counter cold medicine use. There are some instances when you have checked with a physician on dose and symptoms that cold medicines might be okay to use.

Will my child's cold Lead to a More Serious Infection?

Parents often feel that if something is not done or the cold is not caught early, their child will develop a more serious disease. In reality, unless your child has an underlying immune deficiency or illness, this is generally not the case. Most colds will last 10-14 days and there is no intervention that will change this or keep worse infections from occurring.

Some children will experience ear infections with the virus, but again, the virus is going to resolve without intervention.

Rarely, a healthy child can develop other infections like sinus infections or pneumonia. If these are present, your child's symptoms will worsen or change 4-5 days into the illness. They will have persistent fever, difficulty breathing in the chest, or may start acting sicker instead of staying the same or getting better. Sinus infections are sometimes present when the usual cold symptoms last for more than 14 days. Your child getting exposed to another cold shortly after finishing with the last cold is not a sinus infection. It is just another cold.

It is widely thought that when the nasal discharge becomes thick or colored, a more serious infection needing antibiotics has developed. This is not the case. Discolored nasal discharge is a normal phase of the cold and does not indicate the presence of a worsening infection.

When should my child See the Doctor?

If you are concerned about something and want to be evaluated then your child should be seen. A few other things in your child that should trigger an appointment are as follows: (1) A fever for more than 3 days (children less than 3 months old should be seen immediately when they have a fever); (2) A decrease in fluid intake such that the urination is much less than normal; (3) Difficulty breathing in the chest; (4) Actions that suggest your child is in pain; (5) Persistence in symptoms for more than 10-14 days; (6) A change or worsening of the symptoms 4-5 days into your child's illness; (7) Again, if you are concerned, we want to see you.