

What to Know about Children's Cough and Cold Medicines



Tips for Parents



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Regulated Product(s)
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Although most colds in children don't cause serious complications, they can cause anxiety in parents and caregivers. Colds are among the top reasons children visit a doctor. Both non-prescription (over-the-counter) and prescription medicines are available to treat cough and cold symptoms. But most children will get better on their own and may not need medicine.

Some cough and cold medicines also have serious side effects, such as slowed breathing, which can be life-threatening, especially in infants and young children, so it's important to know when your child needs medication, which medications doctors recommend, and when your children can do without medicine.

Children's Cough and Cold Medicines

Over-the-counter (OTC) cough and cold products should not be used for infants and children under 2 years of age because serious and potentially life-threatening side effects could occur. In addition, FDA strongly recommends these products not be given to children ages 2 to under 4 years of age. Manufacturers voluntarily label these cough and cold products to state: "do not use in children under 4 years of age."

Parents and caregivers should be aware that many OTC cough and cold products contain multiple ingredients which can lead to accidental overdosing. [Reading the Drug Facts label](#) can help parents and caregivers learn about what drugs (active ingredients) are in a product.

When giving children a cough and cold product, remember, OTC cough and cold products can be harmful if:

- Parents and caregivers give children more than the recommended amount
- Parents and caregivers give children cough and cold products too often
- Parents and caregivers give children more than one product containing the same drug

Parents and caregivers should not give children medicines that are packaged and made for adults because adult medicines may overdose a child.

Homeopathic Products

You may see other cough and cold medicine being sold for children labeled as [homeopathic](#). The FDA has not evaluated any homeopathic drug for safety or effectiveness and is not aware of any proven benefits of these products.

Homeopathic products are generally labeled as containing very low-level substances, including ingredients from plants, animal or human sources, minerals, and chemicals.

However, some of these products have been found to contain measurable amounts of active drug ingredients and therefore could cause significant harm.

The FDA urges parents and caregivers not to give homeopathic cough and cold medicine to children under 4 years of age. Reported serious side effects in children under 4 years of age taking these products include seizure, allergic reaction, and difficulty breathing. Low blood potassium and low blood sugar were also reported with taking more medicine than recommended.

It is not always possible to prove a reported side effect was caused by a medicine, however these serious side effects occurred soon after a child took the homeopathic cough and cold product.

Other Options for Treating Colds

Here are a few treatments for infants and children with cough and cold symptoms:

- A cool mist humidifier helps nasal passages shrink and allow easier breathing. Do not use warm mist humidifiers because they can cause nasal passages to swell and make breathing more difficult
- Saline nose drops or spray keep nasal passages moist and helps avoid stuffiness
- Nasal suctioning with a bulb syringe -- with or without saline nose drops -- works very well for children younger than a year old. Older children often resist the use of a bulb syringe
- Acetaminophen or ibuprofen can be used to reduce fever, aches, and pains. Parents and caregivers should carefully read and follow the product's instructions for use on the Drug Facts label
- Drinking plenty of liquids will help children stay hydrated

No cough or cold medicine will change the natural course of a cold or make it go away faster.

When to Call a Doctor

Not every sniffle or cough merits a trip to the doctor's office. When in doubt, parents and caregivers should call their health care provider. For all children, call a doctor if you see any of these symptoms:

- A fever in an infant 2 months or younger
- A fever of 102 degrees or higher in children at any age
- Blue lips
- Labored breathing, including nostrils widening with each breath, wheezing; fast breathing; the ribs showing with each breath; or shortness of breath
- Severe headache
- Not eating or drinking, with signs of dehydration (such as decreased urination)
- Excessive crankiness or sleepiness



- Persistent ear pain
- If the cough lasts for more than three weeks
- If the child is getting worse

These symptoms can signal that your child may have something more serious than a cold.

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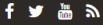
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