It’s 7 p.m. on a Friday night in the dead of winter. Clear mucous had been pouring out of your child’s nose for 4 days. The cough is keeping the child (and the family) awake. You feel helpless as a parent and just want to do something to make your child feel better. You ask yourself, “Is there a medication that I can give to my child? Should I take my child to see the pediatrician? Will I ever get to sleep again?”

As a parent and pediatrician, I know the frustration felt in the battle against the winter cough and cold in children. These complaints comprise the majority of ill-child visits that I see each winter. Understandably, parents are often worried that a bacterial infection is present which would require antibiotics. The majority of the time, this is not the case. Children usually are diagnosed with a viral upper respiratory infection, otherwise known at the common cold. In this article, I’ll present typical symptoms and course of the common cold, appropriate and safe treatments, and warning signs of a more serious illness.

The common cold is caused by many different viruses. As with all viral illnesses, antibiotics will not improve symptoms or shorten the length of illness. The common cold begins with clear, watery nasal discharge which progresses to thick, sometimes yellow/green discharge. Contrary to popular belief, green or yellow mucous does not indicate the presence of a bacterial infection. This mucous causes a runny nose, but also drips down the back of the throat, causing irritation to the airway and a cough. Along with these nasal symptoms, cold viruses can cause mild headaches, muscle aches, tiredness, and a low grade fever.

There is no 100% effective way to treat or shorten the common cold. In children under the age of 2 years, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that no over-the-counter cough and cold medicines be administered due to safety concerns. Studies have also shown that cold medicines are not effective in children younger than 6 years. Using nasal saline and suctioning in small children and nose blowing in older children will help to improve symptoms. The AAP recommends using honey as a safe, natural treatment for cough in children over 2 years of age. (Half a teaspoon of honey for children aged 2 to 5 years, 1 teaspoon for children aged 6 to 11 years, and 2 teaspoons for children 12 years and older.) Darker honeys, such as buckwheat honey, are believed to be more effective. Ibuprofen or Acetaminophen can also be used for comfort. In the end, the only cure is time. Our job as parents is to keep children as comfortable as we can while we give the body time to fight off the infection.

Even though most illnesses with cough and cold symptoms are caused by viral illnesses, not all illnesses that resemble the common cold should be treated with watchful waiting. After 10 days of persistent nasal discharge, persistent fever ≥102°F, or a harsh, barky cough, another diagnosis should be considered and you should schedule an appointment with your pediatrician. Anytime your child has difficulty breathing or is breathing rapidly, has a decreased fluid intake or urine output, or has lethargy, you should contact your pediatrician immediately.

There is no doubt that dealing with cough and cold symptoms in a child can be a very frustrating ordeal for a parent. Hopefully, the above suggestions will help in minimizing misery in the house and give your child the time he or she needs to fight off the cold. Be sure to call your pediatrician if you have any questions.

Sources:
• Common Childhood Infections (Copyright © 2005 American Academy of Pediatrics, updated 4/08)

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