

TIPS & TOOLS

Question

Can I give my 5-year-old over-the-counter cough medicine?

Kristie E. N. Clarke, MD, MSCR, FAAP

Answer



Coughs and colds—yuck! They make kids (and their parents!) miserable. The symptoms are uncomfortable, last a long time, and can make sleep a challenge. Parents want a fast way to get their little one back to his or her energetic, happy self. I feel for you and really wish I had a quick solution, but the truth is that there is no magic in curing the common cold.

Over-the-Counter Medicine—More Harmful Than Helpful

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) do not recommend over-the-counter cold medicine (/English/safety-prevention/at-home/medication-safety/Pages/Common-Over-the-Counter-Medications.aspx) for kids 4 and under, and for kids 4 to 6-years-old only if advised by your pediatrician. After age 6 the directions on the package can be followed (but be very careful with dosing). Also, since colds are caused by viruses, prescription antibiotics will not help (/English/safety-prevention/at-home/medication-safety/Pages/Antibiotics-for-a-Sore-Throat-Cough-or-Runny-Nose.aspx).

I recommend home remedies over medicine as first line treatment in kids of any age with a simple cold. Why? Because they don't work well, and there are possible side effects. Bottom line—it's not worth it!

What You Can Do at Home

Warm soup and teas can help soothe symptoms and raise spirits.

If your child has a stuffy or runny nose, the mucus running down the throat could be causing some of the coughing. A saline nasal spray and frequent nose blowing (instead of sniffing) can help—rub a bit of petroleum jelly (Vaseline) on the nose area every so often to avoid chafing. A cool mist vaporizer can also keep the mucus moving (clean the vaporizer well between uses).

Another good cough remedy for kids *over age one* is a teaspoon or so of honey, which coats and soothes the throat—my mother always mixed this with a bit of lemon juice or into a simple herbal tea. Sound like an old wives' tale? It was studied! (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3601686/>) Sick kids who got a spoonful of honey before bed had better sleep and less coughing!

Of course, plenty of rest and fluids are in order. For kids 3 months to 1 year of age, 5 to 15 mL of warm water or apple juice can be tried 4 times a day.

It Takes Time

The best prescription for a cold is patience. The first few days are the worst, but cold symptoms in kids can linger for two weeks, with coughing up to 4 weeks. Young kids get 6-8 colds a year on average; that's a lot of coughing and sniffing!

I know you would do anything to make your child feel better, but resist the urge to over treat!

Remember, there is no need to treat a low grade fever—this is the body's way of fighting infection! However, if a fever is interrupting sleep or making your child uncomfortable it can be treated with the acetaminophen (</English/safety-prevention/at-home/medication-safety/Pages/Acetaminophen-for-Fever-and-Pain.aspx>) (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (</English/safety-prevention/at-home/medication-safety/Pages/Ibuprofen-for-Fever-and-Pain.aspx>) (Motrin or Advil) following the dosing instructions (</English/safety-prevention/at-home/medication-safety/Pages/Fever-and-Pain-Medicines-How-Much-to-Give.aspx>).

When to Worry

If your child has difficulty breathing or swallowing, or has a severe cough such as one that causes vomiting, call your doctor for an exam. Also, if your child has asthma, don't dismiss a nighttime cough—it could mean the asthma is getting worse. Symptoms that last longer than the amount of time above, or that are not starting to improve after a week can be re-evaluated. High fevers (102 F or higher) could indicate a more serious infection. Sick infants (3-months-old or younger) should be evaluated by your doctor.

Additional Information from HealthyChildren.org:

- Coughs and Colds: Medicines or Home Remedies? (</English/health-issues/conditions/chest-lungs/Pages/Coughs-and-Colds-Medicines-or-Home-Remedies.aspx>)
- Children and Colds (</English/health-issues/conditions/ear-nose-throat/Pages/Children-and-Colds.aspx>)
- Using Over-the-Counter Medicines with Your Child (</English/safety-prevention/at-home/medication-safety/Pages/Using-Over-the-Counter-Medicines-With-Your-Child.aspx>)
- Fever and Pain Medicine: How Much to Give Your Child (</English/safety-prevention/at-home/medication-safety/Pages/Fever-and-Pain-Medicines-How-Much-to-Give.aspx>)



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