

Common Cold (Upper Respiratory Infections)



What Is It?

The common cold is a mild infection of the upper respiratory tract (the nose, throat, ears and eyes) which is caused by over 100 different types of viruses. The most common of these is a rhinovirus (nose virus).

What Are the Symptoms?

Cold symptoms include stuffy or runny nose, sore throat, coughing or sneezing, watery eyes, chills and fever. "Flu" is also caused by viruses (influenza A or B) and has symptoms of high fever, chills, congestion, coughing and muscle aches. Most people who get the flu feel too ill to attend child care.

A runny nose generally accompanies a cold but can also accompany allergies. In the case of a cold, the mucus from the nose generally progresses from being very thin and watery in the beginning (when it is most contagious) to thick and cloudy as the cold progresses. At this time it can also become yellow or green. The green discharge is not as contagious, but becomes a problem for the child if it lasts more than 10 to 14 days. If accompanied by a fever or headache, it may indicate a sinus infection which will need medical treatment. A cough accompanied by wheezing or difficulty breathing requires medical attention.

Who Gets Colds and How?

Young children usually catch many colds each year, and will catch even more if they have young siblings or attend a child care facility. Colds and flu are very contagious. They spread when people touch discharges from the nose or mouth, cough and sneeze, kiss on the mouth, share food or eating utensils, and are together in crowded, poorly ventilated and overheated rooms.

The virus concentration is usually highest and most contagious two to three days before a person develops symptoms of illness. Viruses continue to be present in respiratory discharges for three to five days after symptoms begin. As a result, infected children and staff have already spread viruses before they begin to feel ill. In fact, children and adults often have mild colds which may go undetected but still cause these persons to be contagious.

When Should People with this Illness Be Excluded?

There is no need to exclude these children and staff if they feel well enough to attend and do not require more care and attention than the program can provide.

How Can I Limit the Spread of Colds?

- Make sure that all children and staff use good hand washing practices.
- Wipe noses with clean tissues, dispose of them properly and wash your hands.
- Don't share food, bottles or toothbrushes.
- Don't kiss children on the mouth.
- Open windows and maximize outdoor play.
- Teach children to cough into their elbow and away from people.
- Keep the environment clean.
- Limit physical contact between young infants and infected children.