

Fighting Off Winter Ills

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Winter has landed, and along with it comes cold and flu season. Doctors' offices, ERs, and hospitals fill up with children this time of year as we all do our best to keep everyone healthy.

About Our Children turned to Dr. Steven Kanengiser, director of pediatric pulmonology with The Valley Hospital for his guidance on how to keep our children as free of winter illnesses as possible.

About Our Children: What are the most prevalent winter or cold weather ailments for children?

Dr. Steven Kanengiser: The most common winter ailment for children is the well-named common cold. This is a viral infection in the upper part of the respiratory tract. Symptoms can include a runny nose or nasal congestion, sore throat, cough or headache. Young children may have a low-grade fever. Most colds worsen over three to five days and then improve, usually disappearing completely in a week to 10 days. Children may get multiple colds over the course of a year, but they are more common in winter.

Bronchiolitis is another common viral respiratory infection in young children, typically those under two years of age. Symptoms include nasal congestion, cough, low-grade fevers, and wheezing. This illness may be caused by a number of viruses. The most common and well known is RSV, but there are many others, and one is not necessarily worse than the other.

Influenza, or "the flu," usually affects the whole body and it comes on very quickly. Symptoms can include high fever, cough, sore throat, headache, and muscle aches and pains. The fever often lasts for five days. Early diagnosis may be useful because there are medicines that can be started within 48 hours of the onset of the fever that may shorten the course of the illness.

Croup is a viral infection of the voicebox and the trachea that usually comes on suddenly in the middle of the night with a loud, frequently barking or seal-like cough. These symptoms can alarm parents, but it is usually not a serious infection. It is, however, important to calm a child with croup, since that will improve their breathing. Sitting in a steamy bathroom or stepping outside into cold, dry air can also help.

Pneumonia is an infection in the lungs, and can be caused by either a virus or bacteria. Children with bacterial pneumonia, the more severe variety, typically have a high fever and worsening cough. They may also complain of chest pain and parents may notice a drop in energy and "spirits."

Strep throat, a bacterial infection, typically shows up among school-age children. They frequently complain of a sore throat, headache and stomachache. Occasionally they will have fevers.

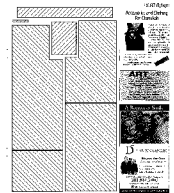
AOC: How can we prevent our children from getting sick this winter?

Dr. Kanengiser: Handwashing, handwashing, handwashing. Did I say handwashing? That is the single most effective way to keep germs and bacteria at bay. In the same vein, avoid touching the eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands. Avoid contact with people who have these infections, but be aware that anyone with the above ailments may be contagious for 1 to 2 days before they are sick. Teach your child to cough or sneeze into a tissue or the bend of the elbow. Clean surfaces frequently. Viruses can stay on surfaces - including toys - for more than six hours. Keep children home when they are sick. Help them

get the rest they need and avoid infecting others. Get a flu vaccine to prevent influenza. All children above six months of age should get the flu vaccine. So should the caregivers of children of any age.

AOC: What is the difference between RSV, bronchitis, and pneumonia?

Dr. Kanengiser: This is a good question and the answer is not always so simple. RSV is an abbreviation for respiratory syncytial virus. It is a common virus and it is well known because we have been able to test for it for over twenty years. Nearly every child is infected at least once by the time they turn two. RSV can cause colds, bronchiolitis, pneumonia, or croup. Symptoms can vary from mild cold-like symptoms to rapid breathing, persistent cough, and wheezing. They usually last for 3 to 7 days. There is no specific treatment for RSV other than rest and drinking fluids. Bronchitis is an inflammation of the large airways, which is usually caused by viruses but occasionally by bacteria or allergies. Symptoms may include a severe mucus-y cough that may last several weeks, long after other symptoms have gone away, difficulty breathing, chest pain during coughing or deep breathing, and possibly a slight fever. The best treatments are rest and fluids. Antibiotics will only be helpful if the bronchitis is caused by bacteria, which is far less common. Children usually recover in seven to 10 days. Pneumonia is an infection that inflames the air sacs in the lung. Symptoms include a mucus-y cough, fever, chills, and difficulty breathing. Both viruses and bacteria can cause pneumonia. Pneumonia symptoms are typically worse than those of bronchitis. A



child who has a cold for a few days and then suddenly develops a high fever and worsening cough may need to be seen to rule out pneumonia. Bacterial pneumonia can be treated with antibiotics.

AOC: When should a parent see a doctor and when should they handle the illness themselves with OTC medicine?

Dr. Kanengiser: For children less than 2-3 months of age with a fever, parents should contact the child's doctor. If a child has rapid breathing, difficulty breathing, poor feeding, high fever, or blue lips and tongue, parents should seek medical attention right away.

AOC: Is over-the-counter cough medicine effective?

Dr. Kanengiser: The short answer is no. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that over-the-counter cough and cold medicines not be given to children under 2 years of age. Multiple studies have shown that cold and cough products don't work and in children younger than 6 years of age they may have potentially serious side effects. A cough itself is helpful in clearing mucus from the lungs and doesn't necessarily need to be suppressed. Make sure the child rests and drinks an increased amount of fluids. If there is fever, medicine to control fever like acetaminophen or ibuprofen can be helpful. If an infant is having difficulty breathing or drinking because of severe nasal congestion, then clearing the nose with saline (saltwater) nose sprays or drops can be helpful. This can be followed by suctioning with a bulb syringe. This can be very helpful before each feeding and bedtime. For children older than one, a teaspoon of honey before bedtime may help.

AOC: Is there anything else you would like to add?

Dr. Kanengiser: Pediatricians can treat these illnesses. However, if a child requires hospitalization or has recurrent episodes, please consider asking the pediatrician if they should see a pulmonary specialist.

Heidi Mae Bratt is the editor of About Our Children.



Dr. Steven Kanengiser with a patient.