



# LimeHealth

Health information one slice at a time

## **Colds in Babies**

**By Melanie Haiken, M.A.**

### **How do I know if my baby has a cold?**

A cold is just the common name for an infection of the respiratory system caused by a virus. In other words, if your baby is sniffing, stuffed up, or sneezing a lot, it's probably a cold. Doctors often suggest that moms check the color of their baby's mucus. If it changes from watery to yellow or greenish, it's almost certainly a cold.

### **What's the difference between a cold and the flu?**

Flu season lasts from October to May, peaking between late December and early March. If your baby is sick during that time it might be the flu. The flu -- or influenza -- is a virus that usually causes a high fever, fatigue, chills, and body aches, in addition to the respiratory symptoms of a cold. During the flu season, doctors recommend that children and teens between 6 months and age 19 get a flu shot.

### **Why do babies get so many colds?**

Unfortunately, it's normal for your baby to get colds. Doctors say most healthy babies have six colds or more before their first birthday. Your baby gets more colds than you do because her immune system is not functioning at full capacity yet. Also, she hasn't yet developed immunity to the many different viruses that cause colds.

Being around other children also exposes her to more viruses, including older siblings who bring home viruses from school or daycare. So unfortunately, research shows that children in daycare get more colds, ear infections, runny noses, and other respiratory troubles than kids cared for in the privacy of their home.

Your baby may get sick more often during cold months because that's when viruses spread across the country. That's also a time when people turn on indoor heating, which dries nasal passages and allows cold viruses to thrive. Because of the cold, she may spend more time indoors, where viruses are more likely to be passed from one person to another.

### **What is the best way to treat a baby's cold?**

Viruses don't respond to antibiotics, so no medicine will cure a cold. Your baby's immune system has to fight it off. And don't give your baby over-the-counter cold remedies: The US Food and Drug Administration issued a public health advisory in 2008 that warns of life-threatening side effects that can occur when using these drugs on children younger than two and recommends not using them. Also, doctors advise against using cough suppressants in all children because coughing serves the important purpose of clearing your baby's airways. (Talk to your doctor, however if coughing interrupts your baby's sleep.) If your baby has a fever, you can give her a pain reliever like children's acetaminophen (Tylenol) or, if your baby is at least 6-months-old, children's ibuprofen to bring it down and make her more comfortable. But never give aspirin, which can cause Reye's syndrome, a serious condition.

There are lots of ways you can make your baby feel better and make sure the cold goes away quickly and doesn't turn into something worse. Here are the basics of cold care:

- \* Make sure she gets plenty of rest and sleep.
- \* Give her plenty of fluids such as breast milk, milk or formula, water or juice to loosen the congestion and help prevent dehydration. Counter congestion by putting over-the-counter saline drops in her nose, then suctioning out the mucus with a suction bulb. Clearing out your baby's nasal passages will help also ease breastfeeding, so do this just before feeding time.
- \* Ease irritation around her nostrils by applying petroleum jelly or another topical ointment. Moisten the air she breathes by running a cool mist vaporizer in her room. Or make your own steam room by taking your baby into the bathroom with you while you run a hot shower to create steam.
- \* Ease your baby's breathing by letting her sleep in the infant car seat or slightly elevating the head of her mattress by placing a folded towel or blanket under the end where her head goes. Don't overdo it, though, or she may roll down to the other end. (Never use pillows to prop up your baby; they could suffocate her if she rolls over the wrong way.)

### **How can I tell if my baby's cold has turned into something more serious?**

If your baby has the common cold, you should see some improvement in a few days. If your baby is younger than 3 months, call your doctor at the first sign of illness since a cold can develop into a more serious condition such as croup or pneumonia. And if she has a temperature of 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit or higher, contact your doctor right away. If your baby is 3- to 6-months-old, call your doctor if her temperature reaches 101 degrees, or if it stays elevated at 99.5 degrees or higher for more than 24 hours. For babies older than 6 months, call your doctor if she has a fever of 101.4 or higher for more than three days.

There are other signs of more serious illness:

\* Difficulty breathing, such as wheezing or gasping. These symptoms could be a sign of pneumonia or respiratory syncytial virus, a relatively common but potentially serious respiratory problem in babies under 1-year-old.

\* Lack of appetite.

\* Coughing that lasts for more than a week.

\* Yellow discharge from the eye.

\* Crying when sucking during a feeding, or pulling and rubbing her ear. This could be a sign of an ear infection.

### **Is there anything I can do to prevent my baby from getting colds?**

You can't prevent every cold, but there are things you can do to minimize your baby's exposure and boost her defenses:

\* Make sure family members and friends wash their hands before picking up your baby.

\* Keep your baby away from sick children or adults as much as you can.

\* Teach everyone in the family the importance of sneezing into a tissue.

\* Make sure your baby gets plenty of fluids, since dehydration can cause dry nasal membranes, which are more susceptible to colds.

\* Protect your baby from exposure to secondhand smoke, which puts her at risk for upper respiratory problems.

\* Breastfeed for as long as you can, because breast milk contains powerful antibodies that boost your baby's immunity against colds and other illnesses.

If your baby is in daycare, there's not much you can do about the fact that she is exposed to more colds than babies who are cared for at home. You can ask daycare attendants to pay attention to washing their hands every time they change diapers, wipe a runny nose, or otherwise handle babies who may have a cold.

But the truth is, many viruses are simply contracted from other sick children and the things they touch when they sneeze or wipe their noses. One way to keep colds from spreading is to keep your child at home when she does show signs of being sick. That way you help prevent a cold from being picked up by another child and cycling its way back to yours.

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