

Patient information from BMJ

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Treating coughs and colds in children

Coughs and colds are common in young children. Although these illnesses usually last only a few days, they can be hard on children and on their parents, who want to help their child feel better. However, parents looking to ease their child's symptoms with an over-the-counter medicine might be surprised to find few options.

Many over-the-counter cough and cold remedies that were available for many years are now **not recommended** for younger children in some countries. In the UK, for example, medicines containing the following ingredients are not recommended for children under the age of 6:

- brompheniramine, chlorphenamine, diphenhydramine, doxylamine, promethazine, and triprolidine (antihistamines)
- dextromethorphan (a cough suppressant)
- guaifenesin and ipecacuanha (expectorants to help you cough up phlegm)
- ephedrine, oxymetazoline, phenylephrine, pseudoephedrine, and xylometazoline (decongestants to unblock nasal passages).

These restrictions stem in part from a US review of the safety of cough and cold medicines for young children. It found several worrying cases where children had been seriously harmed, often because they had been accidentally given a dose of medicine that was too high.

Also, there's no strong evidence that children's cough medicines do any good.

There are some treatments that are suitable for younger children with coughs and colds. But you still need to take great care to **never give more than the recommended dose**.

Also, bear in mind that most colds and coughs clear up on their own within a few days. Medicines won't cure the cough or cold. They will only help make the symptoms a little milder.

- To lower a child's temperature you can use paracetamol or ibuprofen - as long as you don't give them more than the recommended dose. Always read the labels carefully.

You should **never give aspirin to children under 16 years old**. It can cause a serious problem called Reye's syndrome that affects the brain and the liver.

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- For treating coughs you can use honey and lemon mixed with some water. However, you should **never give honey to babies under 1 year old**, as they could develop a rare but serious illness called infant botulism.
- Nasal drops of saline (sterile salt water) can be used to help unblock a child's nose. These drops can be particularly helpful for babies who are having trouble feeding because of a blocked nose.
- You can also help relieve a child's blocked nose using vapour rubs and inhaled decongestants that you put on children's clothing, such as menthol. But these are not usually recommended for very young children, as they can be irritating.
- It's important to make sure your child drinks plenty of fluids while they are ill, so they don't become dehydrated. Warm drinks can help soothe the throat.

The restrictions on cough and cold medicines don't usually apply to older children. But it's still important to take certain precautions:

- Read the label on any medicine you give your child. Check the active ingredients section of the label and the correct dose for your child's age.
- Be very careful if you give more than one medicine to a child. If you use two medicines with the same active ingredient (such as paracetamol) your child could get too much.
- Only use the measuring spoons or cups that come with the medicine.
- Call a pharmacist, doctor, or other healthcare professional if you have any questions about using cough or cold medicines for a child.

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