

TAKE A DEEP BREATH

by Kristin Lemmert

You know the cough – the one from down the hall that wakes you in the middle of the night. Whether your child is six months or six years, you start your assessment as soon as you hear it. But before you hit your doctor’s number on speed dial, Sinai Hospital pediatrician Michael L. Zollicoffer, M.D., recommends that you take a deep breath.

“Determine if something is different about this particular cough,” he says. “If not, let it take its course, typically ten to twelve days. It’s most likely a cold.”

Exposure Is Good.

Dr. Zollicoffer is sympathetic - as a parent, your agenda is to have a healthy child, he says. Like most moms, you want your kid better - now.

But ninety percent of the time, a cough is a just a cough – the frequent dance partner to a cold. With over 200 different cold viruses, gaining exposure to these viruses is a good thing. Dr. Zollicoffer even tells parents that their child should have a cold every day from birth to three-years old. Congestion is normal, he says, which is tough for many parents to hear.

Children strengthen their immune system through repeated exposure to other germs and cold viruses, he says. For exposed children, the “slow down” in colds occurs at the age of three. For non-exposed kids, it starts when they begin daycare or school and typically takes three years.

When “Something’s” Different

When should you contact your child’s pediatrician about a cough? According to Dr. Zollicoffer, the answer varies from child to child. As long as they are active, let them process the cold. For example, a wet or dry cough is fine if your child is at her normal level of activity.

Instinctively, you know what is normal for your child, explains Dr. Zollicoffer. So, when you feel uncomfortable about your child’s condition and you recognize that something is different, contact your pediatrician.

These alerts include gasping for air, wheezing, high fever, lethargy, and refusal of all liquids and food. The most severe complications require a call to your doctor or urgent care center immediately (e.g., being “hungry” for air), while lesser ones may be handled with an office visit. Better-known cold viruses include RSV and adenoviruses that have complications like bronchiolitis, croup, pneumonia, wheezing, and asthma. He offers the following advice for each of those complications:

- **Bronchiolitis:** A cold with severe wheezing, Bronchiolitis runs marathons through daycares and playgroups. But many children, according to Dr. Zollicoffer, will contract and recover from Bronchiolitis without even knowing it. For others, treatments include hospitalization, nebulizer treatments, and oral steroids.

- Croup: Because of their smaller-sized tracheas, kids with croup have a barking (stridor) cough accompanied by difficulty in breathing. Take your child outside immediately or sit with him in a steam-filled bathroom. A change in humidity can help your child to breathe easier.
- Pneumonia: One of the more complicated complications, pneumonia can be a viral or bacterial strain, and symptoms may include fever, chills, vomiting, headache, wheezing, and coughing. Treatment may include administering an antibiotic.
- Asthma: Although not a virus, the condition of asthma can complicate recovery from typical cold viruses. If your child has more than three episodes of wheezing, Dr. Zollicoffer would term him or her an asthmatic – a child who no longer has reactive airways disease. Your child may be prescribed medicines delivered by nebulizers or inhalers depending on their age. Be sure to educate yourself on the type of medicine, and work with your pediatrician to make that your child is taking the treatment correctly.

The Old Wives Were Right.

Although you can't instantly cure your child's cough associated with a common cold, you can ease their pain. To help them physically feel better, consider some new and old home remedies that would make your great-great grandmother proud.

- Chicken Soup: Studies have found that chicken soup has anti-inflammatory properties that relieve colds and flu side effects. To make a pot of the real thing, shortcut the process by purchasing a rotisserie chicken and organic chicken broth. Or quicker yet, pick up some "homemade" chicken soup in your local market's deli section.
- Vapor Rub: Rub liberally on your child's chest and cover with a handkerchief (to protect their pjs from grease stains). Call your child "pardn'r" or "Tex." Next, apply a thick coat to the soles of their feet and cover with socks. (It's a Southern Old Wives' Tale.) Be sure to purchase the Baby version of vapor rub for kids under two.
- Honey: Give your child (over two-years old) two teaspoons of pasteurized honey at bedtime. (Never give honey to an infant under the age of one.) Studies have found that honey serves as a cough suppressant. For older kids, push honey and lemon tea to ease sore throats during the day. Use pasteurized honey to prevent botulism poisoning.
- Orange Juice: Increase your child's Vitamin C intake during the first couple days of the cold by offering orange juice and other fruit juices. Make juice ice cubes and add to your child's drink.
- Limit Dairy: In toddlers and older children, too much dairy (milk and yogurt) is thought to thicken mucus at a time when you need to thin it. Don't overdo the dairy. Instead, push other fluids and serve plenty of popsicles or slushies.
- Humidifier: Run a cool mist humidifier in your child's bedroom at night and in your child's playroom or living room during the day. Be sure to clean it properly to prevent mold.
- Saline Spray: Use over-the-counter saline spray or saline drops thin your child's nasal mucus. If you do suction your infant's nose, be careful to not over-suction. It can cause nosebleeds.

- Rest: Let your child get plenty of rest. Prop your child up on pillows on the couch and pop in a DVD. To save money on rentals, go to your local library or borrow from other moms in your playgroup or neighborhood.
- Handwashing: To try to keep yourself and other members of your family from catching the cold virus, be sure to wash your hands.

Although common colds can be trying for both your child and your sanity, your child needs exposure in order to acquire a strong immune system. Be patient, advises Dr. Zollicoffer, and understand that every cough is not life or death. In fact, a cough may just be a common cold and in terms of strengthening your child's immunity, that's a good thing.