

Respiratory Problems in Children under 5 years of Age

Guidance for Patients

Viral Coughs and Colds

- Viral infections cause coughs, colds, sore throats, sneezes and snuffles. They are most common in winter, when we all tend to be indoors more and viruses spread more easily between us. Viral infections do not respond to antibiotics
- The average number of viral infections is 8-10 per year until your child is 5 years old, so over winter your child may get a new virus every 3-4 weeks!
- When your child catches a cold they often develop a 'noisy chest' or a 'chesty cough' (this is because they have smaller airways and thinner rib cages than older children or adults). It does not mean they have a pneumonia, when they would generally be much more unwell (see below).
- Green phlegm or nasal discharge does not necessarily mean the infection is due to a bacteria and needing an antibiotic. The colour is due to the cells that the body makes to fight off the infection, which is most likely to be viral.
- After 5 days of a viral infection any fever should have settled but half of all children will cough for 2 weeks, and a quarter for 3 weeks, but they should be otherwise well (it can seem as though they have 'one big cold' all winter!)
- Young children come across many different cold viruses that are 'new' to them at nursery, playgroups and school etc. This is how a young child's body learns and develops their immune system to fight off future infections.

Things you can do at home to help:

- Give your child plenty of drinks
- If your child is unhappy and hot then you can use paracetamol or ibuprofen
- Keep them away from smoke and anyone who smokes because cigarette smoke can aggravate your child's cough and cold

Seek medical advice/help for your child if they;

- are grunting (an 'effort' noise with every breath), flaring their nostrils, sucking in their chest between their ribs or bobbing their heads
- taking less than half of their usual fluids or having no wet nappies for 12 hours
- have a temperature of 39 ° C and they are between 3-6 months of age
- have a cough for more than 3 weeks and are not getting better

Seek urgent help if your child;

- is breathing more than 60 breaths per minute (1 breath every second)
- is pausing in breathing for more than 10 seconds, especially if your baby is under 3 months of age
- has blue lips or your baby is floppy and exhausted/difficult to wake up
- has a temperature of 38 ° C or more in a baby less than 3 months of age

