



Viral Infections & The Common Cold

What is a viral infection?

When a virus enters your body, it grows into a viral infection. Your body's immune system must fight to destroy the viruses. The most common virus is the common cold. In addition to the common cold (upper respiratory infection), other viral illnesses in children include fifth's disease, coxsackie (hand-foot-mouth), gastroenteritis (stomach bug), & influenza.

Viruses are spread from direct contact with others via infected body fluids or secretions. A common way to catch a virus is by touching an infected person or item and then rubbing your eyes or nose. They can also be inhaled after someone coughs or sneezes. Viruses can live on surfaces such as toys, tables, or telephones.

In general, a healthy diet, regular exercise, and plenty of rest will help your child fight off infection effectively.

Symptoms

Symptoms of a virus are typically mild, can vary based on where they are in the body, and usually clear without treatment. Some viruses may cause a sore throat, cough, runny nose, headache, or muscle aches. Others may cause abdominal symptoms like vomiting & diarrhea.

If fever is present, children should be kept home from school/activities until they are fever-free for twenty four hours. Symptoms usually peak in 2-3 days and gradually improve over 10-14 days. Sometimes, cough may linger for 3-4 weeks!

How are viruses treated?

Antibiotics do not treat viral infections. Treating the symptoms of a virus is the only way to manage such illness. Over the counter cough and cold medicines have no proven effect and may even have serious side effects. There is also no evidence to indicate that zinc, Echinacea, or vitamin C supplements are beneficial during illness. Sometimes, bacterial infections may complicate viruses (such as ear infection) and in this case antibiotics may be used.

What is the best way to manage a viral illness or cold?

Get plenty of rest

Drink lots of fluids

Catch sneezes & coughs with tissues or your elbow & wash your hands frequently

Avoid sharing utensils, water bottles/drinks, etc.

Use saline nasal drops and/or a cool mist humidifier to thin nasal discharge & moisten the air

Use honey to help suppress cough (do not use in children <1 year)

Use acetaminophen or ibuprofen for fever & pain relief

When should I call the office?

For illness in young children

Fever over 101°, especially if it persists two days after your office visit