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Coughs in children: home care and when to see your pediatrician

Cough is one of the most common reasons families come to see me, and it is usually a helper: it is how the body clears the airway. In most children it comes with a cold caused by a virus and gets better on its own, although it can last 2 to 3 weeks. Because it is viral, antibiotics will not cure it or make it shorter. In this guide I share how to comfort your child at home, which medicines to avoid and when to see me.

Does a cough always need treatment?

No. If your child is coughing or stuffy but is happy, playing, eating and sleeping well, there is no need for medicines or remedies. It is worth easing symptoms when the cough bothers them, keeps them up at night or is very dry and irritating. And when they do need relief, home care usually works better than syrups.

What you can do at home

1 A clear nose

- Babies breathe mostly through their nose, so even a little mucus makes feeding and sleeping harder.
- Put 2 or 3 drops of saline (from the pharmacy) in each nostril, one side at a time, then use a bulb syringe or nasal aspirator, or ask your child to blow their nose.
- Do it before feeds and bedtime, and whenever breathing through the nose is hard.
- Wipe away sticky mucus with a damp cotton ball, and dab a little petroleum jelly around the nose if the skin is sore.

2 Plenty of fluids

- Fluids thin the mucus so it is easier to clear, and replace what is lost with fever and fast breathing.
- Offer small, frequent sips; water is the best choice, and warm soup helps too.
- Keep breastfeeding on demand. If a stuffy nose makes nursing hard, you can pump and offer your milk in a cup or bottle.
- If your baby drinks formula, keep offering it as usual; they may want smaller, more frequent feeds, and clearing the nose before the bottle helps them eat better.

3 Honey, only after age 1

It soothes the throat, calms the cough and helps with sleep; in studies it worked better than cough syrups. **Never before 12 months**, because of the risk of botulism.

Ages 1 to 5	½ teaspoon
Ages 6 to 11	1 teaspoon
Age 12 and up	2 teaspoons

If you give it at bedtime, brush their teeth afterwards.

4 Moist air

- If the air at home is dry, a humidifier helps with congestion and dry cough.
- Choose a cool-mist one: it cannot cause burns. Place it near your child but out of reach, and clean it as the manufacturer says so it does not grow mold or bacteria.
- A warm bath, or sitting together in a steamy bathroom with the hot shower running, also helps. Never leave a child alone in the water.

5 Menthol rub, from age 2

- It can ease congestion and cough, especially at night.
- Apply it to the chest and the front of the neck, never on the face or near the eyes and nose. Store it out of reach.
- **Never under age 2:** camphor can be toxic, and the vapors can irritate the airway.

6 A smoke-free home

- Cigarette and vape smoke irritate the airway and make the cough last longer.
- No smoking inside the house or the car.
- And don't forget the simple things: rest, a story together and lots of cuddles help them feel better too.

Continued on page 2 »

Medicines: what helps and what to avoid

Cough and cold syrups

Over-the-counter cough, mucus and decongestant medicines have not been shown to help young children and can be dangerous: some ingredients can slow breathing.

Under age 4	Do not use them.
Ages 4 to 6	Only if I recommend it.
Over age 6	OK to use, at the exact dose on the label.

Fever and discomfort

- Fever helps the body fight infection. Treat it if your child is very uncomfortable or listless, which usually happens from 39 °C (102 °F).
- **Acetaminophen** or **ibuprofen** can bring relief. Ibuprofen only from 6 months of age; check with me first if your child has asthma, kidney disease or another chronic condition.
- The dose depends on weight: if you are unsure, check with me before giving it.
- **Never give aspirin** unless a doctor says so: it can cause Reye syndrome, a serious liver illness.
- Watch out for double dosing: many cold medicines already contain acetaminophen.

Your cold and flu season kit

- ☐ Saline drops or spray
- ☐ Bulb syringe or nasal aspirator
- ☐ Petroleum jelly or fragrance-free balm
- ☐ Cool-mist humidifier
- ☐ Digital thermometer (not mercury)
- ☐ Children's acetaminophen and a dosing syringe
- ☐ Honey, for children over 1
- ☐ Menthol rub, for children over 2
- ☐ A cup or thermos for fluids and warm soup
- ☐ The office WhatsApp handy: +57 311 749 7048

About the thermometer: for babies under 3 months, a rectal temperature is the most accurate.

Call me right away or go to the ER if your child:

- Breathes fast, the skin pulls in between the ribs or at the neck, or breathing is noisy and hard.
- Has lips or a face that look blue or grey, or pauses in breathing.
- Is under 3 months old and has a cough or a fever of 38 °C (100.4 °F) or higher.
- Has coughing fits that end in vomiting, a whoop when breathing in, or a change in color.
- Started coughing suddenly after choking on food or a small object.
- Is very drowsy, refuses to eat or has far fewer wet diapers.

When to see your pediatrician

- The fever lasts more than 3 days or runs very high.
- The cough lasts more than 3 weeks.
- They cough every night or with exercise.
- It does not improve with home care, or gets better and then worse.
- Your child is 4 to 6 and you think they need a cough syrup.
- Your child has asthma or another chronic condition and is coughing.
- You simply feel something is not right: you know your child best, and your instinct counts too.

Step by step, we're in this together.
Message us on WhatsApp to book a visit, in English or Spanish.

WhatsApp +57 311 749 7048
camipediatra.com/en/tips/cough · @pediatria_personalizada

Sources

1. HealthyChildren.org (AAP): Coughs and Colds: Medicines or Home Remedies? Updated 2022.
2. HealthyChildren.org (AAP): Cough and Cold Survival Kit: Top Symptom Relief Essentials for Families. Updated 2024.
3. Smith SM et al. Over-the-counter (OTC) medications for acute cough in children and adults in community settings. Cochrane, 2014.
4. Oduwole O et al. Honey for acute cough in children. Cochrane, 2018.

This information is for education only and does not replace a visit with your pediatrician. In an emergency, go to the ER.