

Study Found for Children with Colds, Doctors are Increasingly Likely to Recommend Antihistamines Rather than Cough and Cold Medicine



A study by lead author **Daniel Horton, MD**, assistant professor of pediatrics, found that for respiratory infections in children under 12, physicians are increasingly more likely to recommend antihistamines and less likely to recommend cough and cold medicines. **Brian Strom, MD, MPH**, chancellor, Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences, was a co-author of the study.

Antihistamines have little known benefit for children with colds, and some older antihistamines (e.g., diphenhydramine or Benadryl) cause sedation and occasionally agitation in children. The [study](#), published in *JAMA Pediatrics*, found a sharp decline in cough and cold medicine recommendations for children under 2 after 2008, when the FDA recommended against the medicines for that age group. The American Academy of Pediatrics subsequently recommended avoiding cough and cold medicines in children under 6.

“Families often treat their children’s respiratory infections with cough and cold medicines, some of which include opioid ingredients. However, there is little proof that these medications effectively ease the symptoms in young children,” said Dr. Horton.

The researchers looked at national surveys representing 3.1 billion pediatric ambulatory clinic and emergency department visits in the United States from 2002 to 2015. During that period, physicians ordered approximately 95.7 million cough and cold medications, 12 percent of which contained opioids.

After the FDA’s 2008 public health advisory, however, physician recommendations declined by 56 percent for non-opioid cough and cold medicines in children under 2 and by 68 percent for opioid-containing medicines in children under 6. At the same time, researchers saw a 25 percent increase in doctor recommendations for antihistamines to treat respiratory infections in children under 12.

“There is little evidence that antihistamines actually help children with colds feel better or recover faster. We do know that these medicines can make kids sleepy and some kids quite hyper,” said Dr. Horton.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has various suggestions for treating children with the cold or flu, including use of over-the-counter medicines for pain or fever, honey to relieve cough in children over 1 year old and plenty of rest and hydration.