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Cough & Cold Survival Kit: Symptom-Relief Essentials for Families



When your little one starts showing signs of a cold or flu, it can turn your household upside down in an instant. The last thing you want is to be caught off guard when your child feels miserable. A well-stocked "survival kit" for respiratory virus season can make all the difference.

Whether to soothe a scratchy throat or help clear a blocked nose, here are some basic symptom-relief supplies. With these items ready to go, you'll be prepared to help your child feel better—bringing comfort to both of you during those long, sniffly nights.

What Helps Kids Most When Colds & Flu Strike? | AAP

✅ Nasal saline & a bulb syringe or aspirator

A stuffy nose can be especially uncomfortable for babies and young children. Their nasal passages are a lot smaller than an adult's. Even a small buildup of mucus can interfere with sleep, feeding and overall comfort.

Nasal saline (/English/health-issues/conditions/flu/Pages/caring-for-Your-childs-cold-or-flu.aspx) (saltwater drops, spray or mist) and aspirators are simple but powerful tools to ease your little one's congestion. You can use saline to loosen and clear sticky or dried mucus from your baby's nose. Then, you can gently suction it out with a bulb syringe or nasal aspirator.

Types of nasal aspirators & saline

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Bulb syringes create suction when squeezed and released. There are also nasal aspirators with mouthpieces to suck the nasal mucus out through a tube. (Don't worry: these "snot suckers" have filters to block the mucus from reaching your mouth!). Electric aspirators with hospital-grade suction are also available for home use. They are available without a prescription at drug stores or online.

You can also get saline drops, mists and rinses without a prescription. Or, grab some salt and baking soda to make your own. *(See "How to make your own saline rinse" on this page* (/English/health-issues/conditions/chest-lungs/Pages/Coughs-and-Colds-Medicines-or-Home-Remedies.aspx)*.)* Remember to always use sterile, distilled or previously boiled water if you use a homemade version.

For sticky, stubborn mucus, you might also want to have cotton balls. You can wet one to gently wipe the skin around the nose.

✅ Moisturizers & ointments

A runny nose can make the delicate skin around your child's nostrils raw or chapped. In addition to plenty of tissues or nose wipes, it's good to have a moisturizer such as petroleum jelly, shea butter or other fragrance-free balm on hand.

Dabbing a small amount of moisturizer under the nostrils can help by:

- Soothing irritation: The ointment creates a wetness-proof barrier that helps prevent further irritation from nasal discharge, wiping and blowing.
- Helping to heal chapped skin: The ointment locks in moisture to prevent the skin from drying out. This can speed up healing of chapped or raw areas.
- Cutting down on crusting: Petroleum jelly can also help prevent crusting of dried mucus around the nostrils. This makes it easier to clean.

Remember: apply just a small amount around your baby's nose so they don't inhale any of it.

✅ Humidifier or vaporizer

Winter's cold, dry air can make nasal mucus thicker. Having a humidifier or vaporizer lets you raise the humidity in your child's room. Keeping the air in your child's space moist can help relieve a stuffy nose and dry coughs.

Important safety tips when using humidifiers and vaporizers:

- Place the humidifier near your child but out of their reach.
- Keep and follow the manufacturer's instructions on how to clean the humidifier or vaporizer. Without proper cleaning and upkeep (https://www.epa.gov/indoor-air-quality-iaq/use-and-care-home-humidifiers), the machine can build up mold, bacteria and minerals. Running an unclean humidifier can release these germs and deposits into the air, and breathing them in can irritate the lungs.
- Cool-mist humidifiers generally are considered safer for young children than warm-mist humidifiers or steam vaporizers. That's because there's no risk of burns.

A warm bath (/English/ages-stages/baby/bathing-skin-care/Pages/Bathing-Your-Newborn.aspx) or steam shower (/English/tips-tools/ask-the-pediatrician/Pages/my-baby-has-a-stuffy-nose-how-can-i-help-them-sleep-safely.aspx) treatment can also help moisturize your child's breathing passages. Just be sure to stay with babies and young children at all times when they are in the water.

✅ Chest rubs

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Ointments rubbed on the chest also can be useful during respiratory virus season. They can help relieve symptoms of congestion or coughs, especially at night. The strong-scented, cooling ingredients in the rub (menthol, camphor or eucalyptus oil) may help open nasal passages so your child can breathe easier. Menthol rub can be used on children who are at least 2 years old (/English/ages-stages/Your-Childs-Checkups/Pages/your-checkup-checklist-24-months-2-Years-Old.aspx).

How to use a chest rub:

- Apply the rub to your child's chest and front of the neck (throat area). Avoid the face, especially anywhere near the eyes and nose. It can irritate sensitive skin and mucous membranes.
- Never use mentholated rub on babies or children under 2 years old. When swallowed or absorbed into an infant's skin, camphor can be toxic. The rub's vapors can also irritate their airways.
- As with any medication, read and follow the directions closely. After using the medicine, be sure to put it away—out of reach of children.

✅ Honey

Thank the bees for this one: studies suggest that honey can soothe a sore throat, reduce coughing and help children with respiratory infections sleep. However, **never give honey to babies under 12 months old.** It is not safe because honey can contain bacteria that causes a serious illness called infant botulism (https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001384.htm).

Suggested amounts to give:

- For children 1 to 5 years old: half a teaspoon of honey.
- For children ages 6 to 11 years old: 1 teaspoon of honey.
- For children 12 years or older: 2 teaspoons of honey.

If you give your child honey at bedtime, make sure their teeth are brushed afterward. This will help avoid tooth decay (/English/ages-stages/baby/teething-tooth-care/Pages/How-to-Prevent-Tooth-Decay-in-Your-Baby.aspx).

✅ Supplies to stay hydrated

Staying hydrated is key to helping your child feel better when they're sick. Encourage them to take frequent sips of fluid. Plain water (/English/healthy-living/nutrition/Pages/Choose-Water-for-Healthy-Hydration.aspx) is the best choice. Consider getting your child a fun cup or bottle—one that is easy to clean or run through a dishwasher to kill germs.

At the grocery store, pick up what you need to make or serve your child some warm soup. This classic comfort food is both soothing and hydrating.

Having plenty of fluids during a respiratory infection can:

- Prevent dehydration. Having a fever can cause your child to lose fluids more quickly. So can rapid breathing, which is common with respiratory infections. Drinking plenty of fluids helps replace lost fluids.
- Thin mucus. Being well-hydrated helps keep mucus in the respiratory tract looser and easier to clear.
- Ease a sore throat. Fluids keep the throat moist, which can reduce irritation and pain from coughing or post-nasal drip.

✅ Thermometer

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A reliable thermometer will help you to know if your child has a fever (/English/health-issues/conditions/fever/Pages/When-to-Call-the-Pediatrician.aspx). Checking their temperature helps show whether they're getting better, staying the same or getting worse. A fever that gets too high or lasts too long needs medical attention. *(See "Fever: When to Call the Pediatrician* (/English/health-issues/conditions/fever/Pages/When-to-Call-the-Pediatrician.aspx)*.")*

What type of thermometer is best to check for fever?

It is best to use a digital thermometer to check your child's temperature. Mercury thermometers filled with the silvery metal can break and release toxic (https://poisonhelp.hrsa.gov/faq/household-chemical-products) levels of mercury fumes. In fact, if you have a mercury thermometer at home, remove it (https://www.epa.gov/mercury/storing-transporting-and-disposing-mercury) to be safe.

There are different types of digital thermometers. Depending on the type and your child's age, readings can be taken by mouth, on the forehead or in the ear or rectum. Taking a rectal temperature is considered the most accurate, especially for infants under 3 months of age. *(For more information on thermometers, see "How to Take Your Child's Temperature* (/English/health-issues/conditions/fever/Pages/How-to-Take-a-Childs-Temperature.aspx)*.")*

✅ Over-the-counter pain & fever medicine

When your child' symptom prevent them from sleeping, over-the counter (/English/safety-prevention/at-home/medication-safety/Pages/Using-Over-the-Counter-Medicines-With-Your-Child.aspx) pain and fever medicine can help them feel more comfortable.

Acetaminophen & ibuprofen

Acetaminophen (/English/safety-prevention/at-home/medication-safety/Pages/Acetaminophen-for-Fever-and-Pain.aspx) formulas for infants and children can lower fever and ease muscle aches, sore throat and headaches. Another option for pain and fever is ibuprofen (/English/safety-prevention/at-home/medication-safety/Pages/Ibuprofen-for-Fever-and-Pain.aspx), though it should only be used for children who are at least 6 months old. Also, ask the doctor before giving ibuprofen to your child if they have kidney disease, asthma, an ulcer or another chronic (long-term) illness.

Be sure to read directions closely to make sure you are giving the correct dosage. *(See "How to Give Liquid Medicine to Children* (/English/safety-prevention/at-home/medication-safety/Pages/Using-Liquid-Medicines.aspx)*.")*

What about aspirin & children's cough & cold medicines?

Never give aspirin to your child unless your child's doctor tells you it is safe. Aspirin use is linked with a very serious liver disease called **Reye's syndrome, (/English/health-issues/conditions/abdominal/Pages/Reye-Syndrome.aspx)** especially in children with **the flu (/English/health-issues/conditions/chest-lungs/Pages/The-Flu.aspx)** or **chickenpox (/English/health-issues/vaccine-preventable-diseases/Pages/Varicella-ChickenPox.aspx)**.

Also avoid over-the-counter (OTC) cough and cold medicines (/English/safety-prevention/at-home/medication-safety/Pages/Choosing-Over-the-Counter-Medicines-for-Your-Child.aspx) for infants and children under 4 years of age. Some ingredients in these formulas can **dangerously (https://www.fda.gov/consumers/consumer-updates/should-you-give-kids-medicine-coughs-and-colds)**slow a child's breathing. And other ingredients such as the decongestant **phenylephrine (https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/fda-proposes-ending-use-oral-phenylephrine-otc-monograph-nasal-decongestant-active-ingredient-after)** have been shown to be ineffective.

her concern is that many cold medicines already have pain- or fever-reducers in them. So, if you give one of medicines along with acetaminophen, your child will get a **double dose (https://www.fda.gov/consumers/consumer-updates/dont-double-acetaminophen)**.

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Remember

One of the most powerful tools to help your child feel better is your loving care as they rest and recover. Snuggling together to share a book (/English/ages-stages/baby/Pages/how-to-share-books-with-your-baby.aspx), for example, or giving your little one a gentle little massage (/English/ages-stages/baby/Pages/the-benefits-of-baby-massage.aspx) can do wonders to comfort them.

Also keep in mind that you know your child best. If they aren't getting any better—or something just doesn't seem right—do not hesitate to contact your pediatrician.

More information

- Caring for Kids With Colds & Flu: Simple Remedies to Ease Symptoms (/English/health-issues/conditions/chest-lungs/Pages/caring-for-kids-with-colds-and-flu-simple-remedies-that-help.aspx)
- Ask the Ped: My baby has a stuffy nose. How can I help them sleep safely? (/English/tips-tools/ask-the-pediatrician/Pages/my-baby-has-a-stuffy-nose-how-can-i-help-them-sleep-safely.aspx)
- Acetaminophen Dosage Chart (/English/safety-prevention/at-home/medication-safety/Pages/Acetaminophen-for-Fever-and-Pain.aspx)
- Ibuprofen Dosage Chart (/English/safety-prevention/at-home/medication-safety/Pages/Ibuprofen-for-Fever-and-Pain.aspx)
- RSV: When It's More Than Just a Cold (/English/health-issues/conditions/chest-lungs/Pages/RSV-When-Its-More-Than-Just-a-Cold.aspx)

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