

# Cough/cold in children 1 year and over - Advice Sheet

Advice for parents and carers



Cough is extremely common in children and usually gets better by itself with no specific treatment, although the cough often takes 2 to 3 weeks to disappear. Occasionally, children with cough can sometimes develop a chest infection.

## When should you worry?



RED

If your child has any of the following:

- Is going blue around the lips
- Has pauses in their breathing (apnoeas) or has an [irregular breathing pattern](#) or starts [grunting](#)
- Severe difficulty in breathing - too breathless to talk or eat/drink
- A harsh noise as they breath in ([stridor](#)) present all of the time (even when they are not upset)
- Becomes pale, mottled and feels abnormally cold to touch
- Becomes extremely agitated (crying inconsolably despite distraction), confused or very lethargic (difficult to wake)
- Develops a rash that does not disappear with pressure (the '[Glass Test](#)')

**You need urgent help.**

Go to the nearest Hospital Emergency (A&E) Department or phone 999



AMBER

If your child has any of the following:

- Has laboured/rapid breathing or they are working hard to breath - [drawing in of the muscles below their lower ribs](#), at their neck or between their ribs
- A harsh breath noise as they breath in ([stridor](#)) present only when they are upset
- Seems dehydrated (sunken eyes, drowsy or not passed urine for 12 hours)
- Is becoming drowsy (excessively sleepy) or irritable (unable to settle them with toys, TV, food or picking up - especially if they remain drowsy or irritable despite their fever coming down)
- Has extreme shivering or complains of muscle pain
- Continues to have a fever of 38.0°C or above for more than 5 days
- Is getting worse or if you are worried

**You need to contact a doctor or nurse today.**

Please ring your GP surgery or contact NHS 111 - dial 111 or for children aged 5 years and above visit [111.nhs.uk](https://111.nhs.uk)



GREEN

- If none of the above features are present

**Self Care**

Continue providing your child's care at home. If you are still concerned about your child, contact NHS 111 – dial 111 or for children aged 5 years and above visit [111.nhs.uk](https://111.nhs.uk)

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## Symptoms of a chest infection

Symptoms of a chest infection can come on over 24-48 hours or more slowly over several days. A child with a chest infection is usually very tired and looks unwell.

Common symptoms include:

- Prolonged fever
- Breathing faster than usual
- Using extra effort when breathing
- Being too breathless to feed (young children) or complete sentences (older children)
- Chest pain when breathing or coughing

## Causes of cough

Most cases of cough in children (under 5 years of age) are caused by viral infections; your child may also have a runny nose, cough or earache.

## Treatment

Most children with cough do not need antibiotics. That's because research has shown that antibiotics make very little difference to how quickly your child gets better.

Antibiotics are usually only considered if your child has a high fever for more than 24 hours and is breathing faster than normal plus using extra effort when breathing. If your child has a wheeze and difficulty breathing, they are very unlikely to benefit from antibiotics but may benefit from inhalers.

In addition, if your child has any amber or red features above, they will need to be urgently seen by a healthcare professional who may decide that your child may benefit from additional treatment.

You can help relieve symptoms by;

- Giving your child paracetamol or ibuprofen if they have a fever
- Encourage your child to drink plenty of fluids

It can take a few weeks for a child to fully recover from a cough. Children rarely cough up phlegm, but they are still clearing their chest. If you are worried that after an initial improvement, their cough is getting significantly worse, or not getting better after 4 weeks, you should take your child to see their GP. Most children make a full recovery from a chest infection with no lasting effects.

## Prevention

It is not always easy to avoid catching these infections. However, good hygiene practices can prevent infections spreading.

- Wash your hands regularly and thoroughly
- Use a tissue when coughing or sneezing and put it in the bin
- Avoid sharing glasses or utensils with people who are unwell

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## FACT!

**Antibiotics don't usually speed up recovery.**

No antibiotics

VS

Antibiotics



7 out of 10 children with a cough will feel better within 3 weeks  
**WHETHER OR NOT** they take antibiotics

**Coughs and colds** generally improve without the need for antibiotics in otherwise healthy, vaccinated children

## Unfortunately antibiotics can cause harm

3 out of 10



children who take antibiotics will experience side effects



### Antibiotic resistance

Using antibiotics also drives the development of antibiotic resistant bacteria (which means that they are harder to treat with antibiotics). Healthcare staff and patients need to work together to make sure that we use antibiotics more wisely so that they remain effective when your child needs them most.



**Antibiotics should only be used if their benefits are likely to outweigh their harms**