

Mommy, my head hurts

Medication isn't always the answer for kids' colds

BY ANNE BURKLEY • For The Patriot-News

You might not be able to cure the common cold, but there are plenty of medications available to relieve its symptoms — that is, if you are over the age of 4. For kids that age or younger, few medicines are available.

Almost all over-the-counter cough and cold medicines for infants and toddlers under the age of 2 were voluntarily pulled from the market in October 2007 because of the risk of serious and sometimes life-threatening side effects.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, since these medications were pulled from shelves, emergency room visits in the United States by children under 2 have decreased by half.

Furthermore, labels for cough and cold medications state that they should not be given to chil-

dren under age 4, and the American Academy of Pediatrics doesn't recommend the use of cough and cold medicine for children under age 6.

Yet when parents go to a pharmacy they primarily want to know what kind of over-the-counter products can be used for their children with cold and flu symptoms and what a dose constitutes, said Kristin McMahon, pharmacy operations specialist with Rite

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Aid Corp. in Camp Hill.

So what can parents do when their little one has a cold?

If your focus is solely on medicine, not a whole lot, said Dr. Patricia Seto of Seto Pediatrics in Lower Paxton Twp. There are, however, a number of other products and techniques that will help relieve symptoms associated with cold and flu.

Fever and body ache

Fever and pain reducers are still available over the counter for both infants and children. Be sure to consult with your pediatrician or pharmacist if you are unsure of the dosage, McMahan said.

A fever with a viral illness, such as the flu, typically ranges between 101 degrees and 104 degrees. It isn't dangerous and doesn't need to be treated. In fact, it helps fight infection. "I don't treat fevers until they are 101, and I don't panic over high fevers," Seto said.

A child's actions are a more accurate measure of how sick they are. "I am much less concerned about the child who has a fever of 102 and is active than the one who has a temperature of 99 and is lethargic," Seto explained.

When a child has a fever, dress them in light clothing and keep them hydrated.

If a child has a high fever, and a fever reducer alone isn't doing the trick, sponging them off in a tub of tepid water for 20 minutes can bring a fever down by 1 or 2 degrees. If they begin shivering or seem uncomfortable, end the bath.

• **When to call the doctor:** Call immediately if an infant less than 3 months old develops a fever higher than 100.4 degrees or if a child is lethargic or has a stiff neck. Notify your pediatrician if an infant between 3 months and 6 months old has a fever higher than 100.4 degrees, if a fever lasts for more than three days in an older child or goes away and returns.

COUGH

To help soothe a dry cough, keep air moist with a cool-mist humidifier. Keep nasal passages cleared with saline and occasional suction. Coughing clears congestion from the chest and airways, so suppression isn't always necessary.

When cough suppression is needed, especially at night, children over the age of 1 can be given a teaspoon of honey, Seto said. A study conducted at the Penn State University College of Medicine concluded that a nighttime dose of buckwheat honey given to children ages 2 to 7 suppressed cough better than dextromethorphan (DM), a common ingredient in over-the-counter cough suppressants.

• **When to call the doctor:** Call immediately if a child's breathing is labored when they aren't coughing, if the cough sounds like the bark of a seal or if a child is making a whooping sound. A cough that doesn't go away, even if other symptoms do, should also be brought to a doctor's attention.

CONGESTION

Congestion is probably the most common side effect of the cold and flu. Saline drops or spray can help to thin and loosen mucus in the nose. Older children might be able to blow their nose, but a bulb aspirator will be necessary for infants and babies.

Don't go crazy with the aspirator, Seto said. Overuse can irritate sensitive nasal tissue. Use it before feeding an infant and before naps and bedtime.

Elevating the head can help a congested child sleep. Older children can use an extra pillow. Pillows

A dose of common sense

WHEN PURCHASING AND DISPENSING over-the-counter medication for children:

- Know your child's weight.
- Use the enclosed dropper or cup, or one from a pharmacy, and never guess at what constitutes a dose. For example, if you need 0.8 milliliters of a liquid, don't guess as to how many teaspoons that is.
- Don't use a kitchen spoon as a teaspoon.
- Don't try to figure out a child's dose of an adult medicine.
- Don't use more or less medicine than is recommended to treat perceived severity of a child's illness.

SOURCE: Food and Drug Administration

pose a suffocation risk for infants, but parents can incline the crib mattress by putting a rolled towel underneath it or allow infants to sleep in a car seat.

Vapor rubs with camphor, menthol and eucalyptus oils can provide congestion relief, particularly at night.

Does rubbing Vicks VapoRub on a child's feet and covering them with socks really help improve the sleep of a congested child? "Some of my parents swear by it," Seto said.

• **When to call the doctor:** If your child is wheezing or having trouble breathing. Wheezing might be a sign of a respiratory virus known as RSV, bronchiolitis or pneumonia.

SORE THROAT

Sore throats are most often caused by viruses and

accompanied by a fever. Unfortunately, viruses aren't treatable. Most children under age 3 with a sore throat fall into this category. Strep throat, which is a bacterial infection and is treatable, is characterized by a fever lasting more than three days, a red throat with spots and swollen glands.

Infant or children's pain-and-fever reducers help alleviate the discomfort of a sore throat.

• **When to call the doctor:** If you suspect your child has strep throat. According to the Mayo Clinic website, some additional symptoms that might indicate strep include swollen glands, problems swallowing, a rash, a fever above 101 degrees or a sore throat that isn't accompanied by cold symptoms and that lasts more than two days.