

Respiratory Tract Infections in Children

Respiratory infections in children are the number one reason for a visit to the doctor. They range from something as simple as the common cold with a runny nose to severe disease of the lungs like pneumonia. They are divided into two groups:

- Upper respiratory tract infection (URTI)- an infection of the nose, throat, and sinuses.
- Lower respiratory tract infection (LRTI)- an infection of the lungs and airways.

When compared to adults, children get LRTI far more often. Young children may have as many as 5-6 episodes of different respiratory infections in a year.

Children are much more prone to respiratory infections as their immune system is not yet strong, and research has also shown that symptoms in children tend to last much longer than in adults. Because children are different from adults in many ways:

- Poor local immunity and high-water content of the body means that symptoms are more severe and last longer.
- Shorter air pipes mean that infections easily reach the lungs or lower respiratory tract and spread more quickly.
- They are exposed to various respiratory infections more often as they play with other children at home or in daycare.
- Some children have weaker immunity towards respiratory infections.

Common upper respiratory tract infections

- Common cold- a viral infection caused by hundreds of different types of viruses.
- Tonsillitis- infection of the tonsils.
- Sinusitis- infection of the sinuses, often secondary to other diseases of URTI.
- Laryngitis- infection of the voice box. Consequently, a change in the voice is characteristic to it.
- Flu- also called influenza, can be URTI or LRTI. It is more common in the winter and is characterized by epidemics.

Symptoms depend on the type of infection and the part of upper respiratory tract involved, but a runny nose and wheezing are perhaps the most familiar and universal symptoms. In sinusitis, there may be a pain in the face and head, while the flu often causes fever and muscular pain.

Common lower respiratory tract infections

- Flu- may infect lower respiratory tract, too.
- Bronchitis- an infection of the air pipe.
- Bronchiolitis- an infection of the airway. Present in infants and young children, only.
- Pneumonia- caused by infection of the lungs and may be life-threatening if untreated.
- Tuberculosis- though not that common in children, this bacterial infection is challenging to treat and requires particular attention.

Symptoms may vary depending on the kind of infection and what part of the lower respiratory tract is involved. Fever and cough, with or without sputum, are common. Some children may have difficulty breathing.

Lower respiratory tract infections may require hospitalization if not treated on time. Some of the red flags are difficulty breathing, a rapid respiratory rate, refusal to eat or drink, and symptoms of dehydration.

Preventing respiratory infections in children

- Teach hand hygiene to children from a young age.
- Keep them away from ill people.
- Have regular medical check-ups and vaccinations.
- Get enough sleep and drink plenty of fluids.

Treatment

As most respiratory infections are viral, antibiotics are not effective in their treatment and are reserved for cases when a bacterial infection has been proven, or when the infection has been complicated by so-called secondary bacterial infection.

In most cases, the best treatment is fluid intake (there is an increased loss of fluid in respiratory illness), enough rest, and taking drugs to keep fever in check.

About the author:

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Dr. Preet is a family physician. He has been practicing medicine for the last 15 years and often sees children with various illnesses in his day-to-day practice. He understands the importance of identifying the severe symptoms of diseases on time and keeping the environment safe for toddlers and young children. He is also a passionate writer.

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