

Runny Nose from a Cold: Does your child need antibiotics?

Q&A Guide for Parents

Your child has a cold and a runny nose. You might think this means your child needs an antibiotic. A runny nose, even if you're seeing thick yellow or green mucus, is normal when you begin to get better from a cold.

What causes a runny nose during a cold?

When germs that cause colds first infect the nose and sinuses, the nose makes clear mucus. This helps wash the germs from the nose and sinuses. After two or three days, the body's immune system fights back, changing the mucus to a white or yellow color. When bacteria that normally live in the nose grow back during the recovery phase, they then change the mucus to a greenish color. This is all normal and does not mean your child needs antibiotics.

What should I do?

- Try using a cool mist vaporizer or saltwater nose drops.
- Watch your child. Runny nose, cough, and symptoms like fever, headache, and muscle aches may be unpleasant, but antibiotics will not help and the symptoms won't go away any faster. When antibiotics aren't needed, they won't help and could even hurt you.

Are antibiotics needed for a runny nose?

A runny nose is a normal part of a cold. Antibiotics do not work on viruses like colds or



runny noses (even if the mucus is thick yellow or green). Your child's doctor or nurse may prescribe other medicine or give you tips to help with symptoms like fever and cough.

Why not just try antibiotics?

When antibiotics aren't needed, they won't help and could even hurt you. Taking antibiotics creates resistant bacteria. Antibiotic resistance occurs when bacteria change and adapt to defeat the killing power of antibiotics. Any time antibiotics are used, they can cause side effects and lead to antibiotic resistance. Side effects of antibiotics can include rash, dizziness, stomach problems, or yeast infections.

Improving the way we take antibiotics can help fight antibiotic resistance and ensure that life-saving antibiotics will be available for future generations.

A runny nose typically gets better on its own, so antibiotics aren't needed. Talk to your healthcare professional about how to feel better while your body fights your illness.

To learn more about appropriate antibiotic prescribing and use, visit www.cdc.gov/antibiotic-use