

Coughs and colds in children

WITH winter approaching and children sharing their bugs in schools and nurseries, here are some top tips to help you deal with this very common problem.

All children cough and get colds. It's normal for infants to have up to ten colds in their first year of life. This is because there are hundreds of different cold viruses and

young children have no immunity to any of them until they catch them. Most children will cough with the cold due to the mucus build-up at the back of the throat. Parents worry about the cough, but of course it's a good thing and it's a way to protect the lungs if that mucus is cleared. It's normal for children to cough for up to six to eight weeks after the virus is caught. Often you don't need to be too

concerned as long as the child is otherwise well.

Symptoms

Children get a blocked nose, and may feel uncomfortable. Often there's a fever for a few days, maybe a sore throat and perhaps a cough. Mucus coming out of the nose might vary in colour (yellow/green/clear) and consistency. Ideally you should encourage child to blow their nose, but this might be a challenge for younger children. A sore throat is also common. Regular anti-fever medicines also reduce pain, so that might help with eating and drinking.

When should I be worried?

This is an important question as most colds can be managed at home and will not require a visit to the doctor. If your child only has a cough/cold,

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with no other problems, then our advice below might be all you need. Some things to consider:

1. Is my child having breathing difficulty? Are they breathing quickly or heavily, which is affecting feeding or making them tired? Is my child wheezing? This noise is a high-pitched whistle that's often confused with a rattle on the chest. Wheezing is more likely if the child's breathing feels tight or distressed. Special medicine (Ventolin) might be needed and so advice should be sought.

2. Is my child getting dehydrated? Not drinking fluids, vomiting or diarrhoea might lead to this and if the child is not passing urine then it's an issue. Giving regular fluids at home is key, but if unable to do this, a doctor check up is warranted.

3. A persistent fever for more than three days might be a sign of bacterial infection, so it might well be worth seeing a doctor to

check.

What is the treatment?

Coming from England, one thing that's very different is the over medicalisation of coughs and colds that occur here. There is little medical evidence for many of them and they carry their risks if the dose is too high for the child. The belief that medicine is needed means parents will visit their doctor regularly, when often rest and fluids are all that are needed, along with anti-fever medicines if it's high.

The American Academy of Pediatrics is very clear on treatment of coughs and colds. They advise no over-the-counter medicines for children under four years of age, as the risks from taking them outweigh the benefits. For children four to six years old, only use with the doctor's advice. For children over six, they are safer, but I would still advise caution – and over the counter medications are likely to have little effect.

Let's look in more

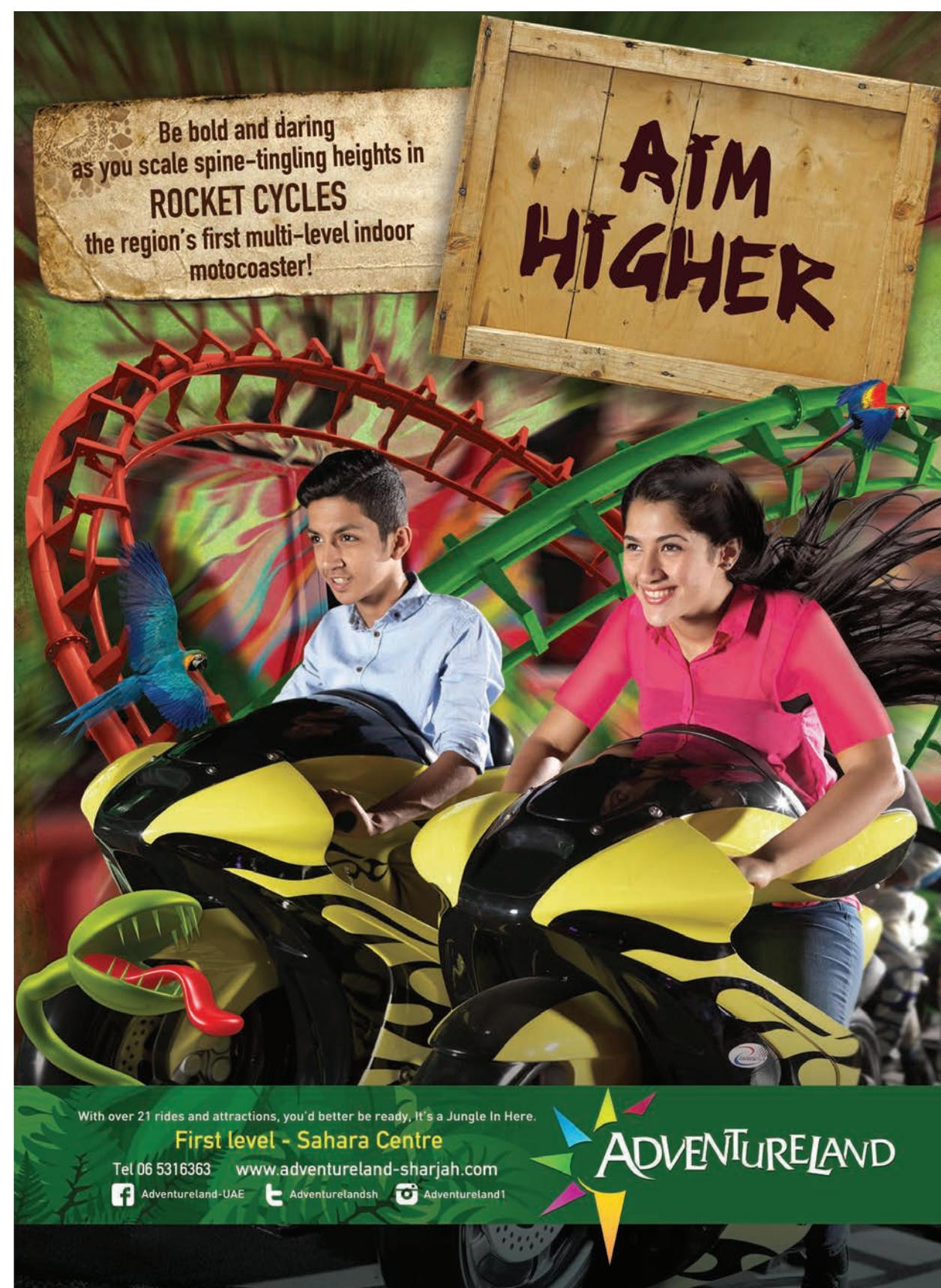
detail at medicines available:

Antihistamines: should not be given for viral colds. If you suspect an allergy, then they might be beneficial and worth a trial (see below).

Cough mixtures: we actually want children to cough, to get better, quicker! Parents do worry about coughing, but often they are more worried than the children are, so we really should let nature take its course.

Steroids: we should be avoiding these in children, as too much of them can affect growth. Steroids should only be given if the child is breathless or wheezy, or needing hospital admission. They should also be given if your child has croup.

Nebulisers: again, in the UK, very few families have these at home. Really, the medicines given by them (Ventolin or steroids) aren't needed for a cough, as they work in the lungs; so should be considered if the child is wheezy. Given water or saline, some children may feel



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a benefit, which won't be the case for all; but at least it's harmless to the child.

What home remedies can I try?

If symptoms aren't bothering the child too much then they don't need medicines or home remedies. If they are happy, playing normally and sleeping peacefully, don't worry.

1. Runny nose: just try suction or blowing. When it's a virus, no medicines will help.

2. Blocked nose:

★ Saline nose spray or drops (or warm tap water) to loosen secretions, but if your child gets distressed, such a short-term benefit might not be worth it. This intervention is most useful in babies whose feeding is affected with a blocked nose.

★ Instil two to three drops of water into each nostril, then suction or blow.

★ No medicines

will help. Nasal decongestants, if used, should only be given for a few days and only for older children.

★ Do not use nasal steroids, as they have no benefit but do have side effects.

3. Coughing

★ Children between three months and one year old give warm clear fluids regularly during the day. Avoid honey because it can cause infantile botulism.

★ For children one year and older, use honey (½ to 1 teaspoon)



as needed. This method can help to thin secretions and loosen the cough. A recent study shows honey as being better than over-the-counter cough syrups.

★ For coughing spasms, exposing your child to warm mist from the shower may help.

Is it an allergy?

Another common question! If these episodes are occurring with a fever or after contact with other children who've had the same symptoms, then it's most likely a viral infection. Allergy is more likely if the child has eczema/asthma or if symptoms seem associated with certain triggers, such as pollens or pet hair. If your child has intermittent attacks for a few weeks at a time, and in between is entirely symptom-free, then this is likely an infection. Allergy attacks won't cause fevers, general aches and pains. Allergy testing is useful if you are worried, or a trial of antihistamines to see

if symptoms get better. Any improvement with medication might be a coincidence – as viral infections get better on their own – so think along the lines of an allergy if you see a consistent pattern.

What next?

Any viral cough/cold can last up to six weeks. It's not uncommon for children to suffer all winter, as before they get chance to recover they get another virus and the whole process starts again. Parents worry about an immune problem and ask about anything to 'boost' this immune system. If a child is well, growing normally and not being admitted to hospital or needing long courses of antibiotics, this is unlikely. Only two things boost an immune system: vaccines and getting more viruses. A healthy diet is key for general well-being, but has no effect on the immune system. The key thing I look for is periods of having no cough or cold in between episodes; even if only for a week or so. That

tells me the child can recover and it's reassuring for me.

Final points

Children are best kept at home. Of course see a doctor if you're worried, but as your child gets more attacks, think about what happened each previous time, in order to increase your confidence in self-management. You can do it!



Dr David Cremonesini is a UK-trained Paediatrician specialising in allergy and respiratory problems. He's working at American Hospital developing an allergy service along with another colleague, Dr Nasrallah and has his own website offering advice on managing allergic problems: www.dubaiallergy.com. **EPP**