



A guide to...

# Upper Respiratory Tract Infections (URTI) *Patient Information*

Children's Emergency Department (CED)

Watford General Hospital



## What is an upper respiratory tract infection?

Upper respiratory tract infections (URTIs) affect the respiratory tract from the larynx (voicebox) up, and include tonsillitis, sinusitis, laryngitis, pharyngitis and influenza; also often called “the common cold”. They are usually caused by viruses, but can sometimes be caused by bacteria.

These are more common in children than adults because of developing immune systems. Children and young people can have up to 12 URTIs per year; this means that it can feel like your child has been unwell for a very long time when in fact, they have had separate illnesses with short breaks in between.

## How long will it last?

Like most viruses, they usually last between 10-14 days but often have a peak of the illness where the child is most symptomatic. This often comes within the first week of the illness starting. Coughs can hang around for many weeks after the illness episode.

## Is it contagious?

Yes! A person becomes contagious a few days before their symptoms begin until all of their symptoms have gone. These illnesses are spread by droplet transmission—this means that when your child coughs or sneezes, other people can inhale the bugs directly. Also, these droplets can fall and settle on hard surfaces; when someone touches this surface and then touches their mouth, nose or eyes, the droplets can transfer to them.

URTI's are most common during the winter months—they do happen all year round though!

## How do I reduce the chance of it spreading?

- Encourage your child to cough / sneeze into their hand / elbow.
- Wash their hands after they have coughed or sneezed, or blown their nose.
- Encourage regular hand washing by all family members.
- Clean surfaces regularly.
- Don't share cups, plates or cutlery.
- Clean toys regularly—both soft and hard toys.

## How can I help my child to feel better?

- Encourage rest
- Give plenty of fluids, and small frequent snacks / meals
- If they have a blocked nose, raise their head up either with pillows (in older children) or by raising the head end of the cot — **DO NOT** place anything under the mattress, always raise evenly from the legs.
- Nasal saline (sodium chloride 0.9%) drops can help relieve a blocked nose in babies and younger children.
- Paracetamol and ibuprofen can help ease discomfort associated with symptoms of the illness or fever (see fever leaflet).

## Does my child need antibiotics?

The most likely answer is **no!**

Antibiotics are used to treat bacterial infection — they are completely ineffective against viruses; even mild bacterial infections do not need antibiotics as our immune system can *usually* take care of it.

As well as the side effects that come with antibiotic use, such as gastrointestinal and skin reactions commonly, there is the growing problem of antimicrobial resistance (AMR). It is **vital** that we only prescribe antibiotics when they are completely necessary.

Antimicrobial resistance happens when germs like bacteria or fungi no longer respond to the drugs designed to kill them. That means these germs are not killed and continue to grow. **It does not mean our body is resistant to antibiotics or antifungals.**

This is a naturally occurring process as these germs are constantly finding new ways to be stronger than the medicines designed to kill them, however every time antibiotics are used, they contribute to it further.

The more we use antibiotics when they're not really needed, the more likely they are to become ineffective in treating the more serious conditions.

Your child will only be given antibiotics if necessary — generally, it is safe to wait to see how the illness develops, or for a swab result.

## Are there any other treatments I can try?

- Decongestants — available as oral or nasal preparations — always seek pharmacist advice.
- Vapour rubs — these can help to ease congestion — always follow the instructions on the packaging.
- Antihistamines can help with children who are excessively snotty but should only be given on the advice of a healthcare professional.
- Cough syrups and complementary / alternative medicines aren't recommended as there is no strong evidence to suggest they are effective. It is important to remember that coughing is a protective mechanism of the lungs and it is important that it is allowed to happen.

## What if I am worried about my child?

- Contact GP or local pharmacy
- <https://hwehealthiertogether.nhs.uk/>
- You can use the NHS 111 service for advice and out of hours support
- Call 999 in a life threatening emergency

If you need this leaflet in another language, large print, Braille or audio version, please call **01923 217 187** or email **westherts.pals@nhs.uk**



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