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Why it is important to share  
and act on information  
about



# Coughs, Colds and More Serious Illnesses

Coughs, colds, sore throats and runny noses are common occurrences in the lives of children and usually are no cause for alarm.

In some cases, however, coughs and colds are danger signs of more serious illnesses such as pneumonia or tuberculosis. Respiratory infections killed some 2 million children under the age of five in the year 2000.



# Key Messages:

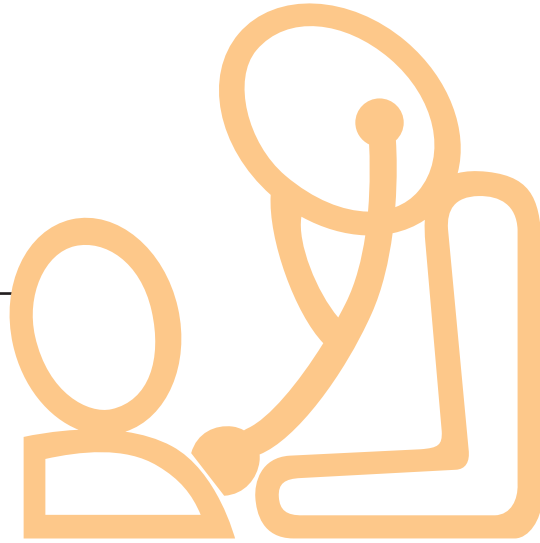
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What every family and community has a right to know about

## Coughs, Colds and More Serious Illnesses

1. A child with a cough or cold should be kept warm and encouraged to eat and drink as much as possible.
2. Sometimes, coughs and colds are signs of a serious problem. A child who is breathing rapidly or with difficulty might have pneumonia, an infection of the lungs. This is a life-threatening disease and the child needs immediate treatment at a health facility.
3. Families can help prevent pneumonia by making sure that babies are exclusively breastfed for at least the first six months and that all children are well nourished and fully immunized.





4. A child with a harsh cough needs immediate medical attention. The child may have tuberculosis, an infection in the lungs.
5. Children and pregnant women are particularly at risk when exposed to smoke from tobacco or cooking fires.





## Supporting Information

# Coughs, Colds and More Serious Illnesses

**1.** A child with a cough or cold should be kept warm and encouraged to eat and drink as much as possible.

Babies and very young children lose their body heat easily. When they have a cough or cold they should be kept covered and warm.

Children with coughs, colds, runny noses or sore throats who are breathing normally can be treated at home and will recover without medicines. They need to be kept warm, but not overheated, and be given plenty to eat and drink. Medication should be used only if prescribed by a health worker.

A child with a fever should be sponged or bathed with cool but not cold water. In areas where malaria is common, the fever could be dangerous. The child should be checked by a health worker immediately.

The nose of a child with a cough or cold should be cleared often, especially before the child eats or goes to sleep. A moist atmosphere can make breathing easier, and it will help if the child breathes water vapour from a bowl of hot but not boiling water.

A breastfed child who has a cough or cold may have difficulty feeding. But breastfeeding helps to fight the illness and is important for the child's growth, so the mother should continue to breastfeed often. If a child cannot suckle, the breastmilk can be expelled into a clean cup and the child can then be fed from the cup.

Children who are not breastfed should be encouraged to eat or drink small amounts frequently. When the illness is over, the child should be given an extra meal every day for at least a week. The child is not fully recovered until he or she is at least the same weight as before the illness.

Coughs and colds spread easily. People with coughs and colds should avoid coughing, sneezing or spitting near children.

**2. Sometimes, coughs and colds are signs of a serious problem. A child who is breathing rapidly or with difficulty might have pneumonia, an infection of the lungs. This is a life-threatening disease and the child needs immediate treatment at a health facility.**

Most bouts of coughs, colds, sore throats and runny noses end without requiring medication. But sometimes these illnesses are signs of pneumonia, which usually requires antibiotics.

If a health worker provides antibiotics to treat the pneumonia, it is important to follow the instructions and give the child all the medicine for as long as the instructions say, even if the child seems better.

Many children die of pneumonia at home because their caregivers do not realize the seriousness of the illness and the need for immediate medical care. Millions of child deaths from pneumonia can be prevented if:

- parents and caregivers know that rapid and difficult breathing are danger signs, requiring urgent medical help
- parents and caregivers know where to get medical help
- medical help and low-cost antibiotics are readily available.

The child should be taken immediately to a health clinic or a trained health worker if any of the following are present:



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- the child is breathing much more quickly than usual: for a child 2 to 12 months old – 50 breaths a minute or more; for a child 12 months to 5 years old – 40 breaths a minute or more
  - the child is breathing with difficulty or gasping for air
  - the lower part of the chest sucks in when the child breathes in, or it looks as though the stomach is moving up and down
  - the child has had a cough for more than two weeks
  - the child is unable to breastfeed or drink
  - the child vomits frequently.

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### **3. Families can help prevent pneumonia by making sure that babies are exclusively breastfed for at least the first six months and that all children are well nourished and fully immunized.**

Breastfeeding helps to protect babies from pneumonia and other illnesses. It is important to give breastmilk alone for the first six months of a baby's life.

At any age, a child who is well fed is less likely to become seriously ill or die.

Vitamin A helps protect against severe respiratory disease and other illnesses and speeds recovery. Vitamin A is found in breastmilk, liver, red palm oil, fish, dairy products, eggs, some orange and yellow fruits and vegetables, and green leafy vegetables. Vitamin A supplements can also be given by a health worker.

Immunization should be completed before the child is one year old. The child will then be protected against measles, which can lead to pneumonia and other respiratory illnesses, including whooping cough and tuberculosis.



**4. A child with a harsh cough needs immediate medical attention. The child may have tuberculosis, an infection in the lungs.**

Tuberculosis is a serious disease that can kill a child or permanently damage the lungs. Families can help prevent tuberculosis if they ensure that children:

- are fully immunized – BCG immunization offers some protection against some forms of tuberculosis
- are kept away from anyone who has tuberculosis or has a cough with bloody sputum.

If the health worker provides special medications for tuberculosis, it is important to give the child all the medicine according to the instructions for as long as specified, even if the child seems better.

**5. Children and pregnant women are particularly at risk when exposed to smoke from tobacco or cooking fires.**

Children are more likely to get pneumonia and other breathing problems if they live in an environment with smoke.

Exposure to smoke can harm a child, even before birth. Pregnant women should not smoke or be exposed to smoke.

Tobacco use generally begins during adolescence. Adolescents are more likely to start smoking if the adults around them smoke, if tobacco advertising and promotion are common and if tobacco products are cheap and easily accessible. Adolescents should be encouraged to avoid smoking and to caution their friends about its dangers.

