Upper respiratory tract infection (URTI) in children

An information guide
Upper respiratory tract infection (URTI) in children

What is upper respiratory tract infection (URTI)?
It is a mild infection of the upper airways.

URTI include:
• the common cold
• laryngitis (infection of the voice box, larynx)
• tonsillitis/pharyngitis (infection of the tonsils and tissues at the back of the throat)
• acute rhinitis (runny nose)
• acute rhinosinusitis (infection of the sinuses)
• acute otitis medial (ear infection)

These conditions usually stop on their own. They are extremely common, a young child can expect about 3-8 colds a year. Children tend to get more upper respiratory tract infections than adults because they have not yet built up immunity (resistance) to the many viruses that can cause these infections.

How does respiratory infection spread?
Upper respiratory tract infections are usually caused by viruses (germs). There are over 200 different types of viruses that can cause upper respiratory tract infection.
Whenever a patient sneezes or coughs, tiny droplets of fluid containing the virus are launched into the air. If these are breathed in by someone else, they may also become infected.

URTI can also spread through indirect contact. If a patient touches an object, e.g. a door handle, the virus may be passed to someone else when they touch the same thing.

What are the symptoms of an upper respiratory tract infection?

Common symptoms are:

- sore throat and cough. Occasionally, vomiting may follow a bout of coughing
- hoarse voice (caused by laryngitis)
- nasal irritation and congestion may interfere with feeding, breathing and sleep – particularly in babies.
- there may be a lot of nasal discharge which is usually clear at first, but becomes thicker and darker as the infection progresses
- sneezing
- fever
- a general feeling of tiredness and weakness, being unwell, restlessness/irritability.

What is the duration of upper respiratory tract infection?

The symptoms usually start suddenly, reaching their peak after 2-3 days, and then decreasing in intensity. In older children, symptoms tend to last about a week but the cough can last for up to 3-4 weeks. In younger children, symptoms typically last 10-14 days.
What are the complications?
The most common complications are:
• in older children: sinusitis and chest infection
• in younger children: ear infection
• very young children and babies: bronchiolitis (chest infection) and croup.
• asthma symptoms may worsen, with an increased cough and wheeze.

What is the treatment for upper respiratory infection?
There is usually no need for any treatment as children usually get better on their own.

Comfort measures and rest are the most appropriate management. Adequate fluids should be given. Ensure the child takes regular drinks throughout the day.

Paracetamol or Ibuprofen is suitable treatment for pain and fever. Some relief from symptoms can be achieved by saline drops in the nose for congestion.

What about antibiotics?
Antibiotics are usually ineffective for URTIs as they are usually caused by viruses. Antibiotics can cause adverse effects, for example, diarrhoea, vomiting and rash. As with all medicines, there is a risk of side effects.
Can upper respiratory tract infections be prevented?
Prevention is difficult. Many germs (viruses) can cause a URTI. Also, many viruses that cause URTIs are in the air, which you cannot avoid. However, the following are suggestions that may reduce the risk of spreading URTI.

People in the household should wash their hands frequently with soap and water. Avoid sharing towels, flannels, toys, etc.

When to seek medical advice?
When there is a worsening of symptoms such as:
- fast breathing
- shortness of breath
- becoming drowsy
- any other symptom that you are concerned about

Contact details
Children's ward at Royal Oldham Hospital is 0161 627 8866
Children's ward at North Manchester General Hospital is 0161 625 8273
Paediatric Observation & Assessment, Ward 4, Fairfield General Hospital is 0161 778 2511
Helpful telephone numbers

NHS 111- Emergency and urgent care services

You may also use this space to record other telephone numbers you may find useful:

GP –

Health visitor –

Community childrens nursing team –

BARDOC/GO TO DOC –
If English is not your first language and you need help, please contact the Ethnic Health Team on 0161 627 8770

For general enquiries please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 0161 604 5897

For enquiries regarding clinic appointments, clinical care and treatment please contact 0161 624 0420 and the Switchboard Operator will put you through to the correct department / service

Date of publication: December 2014
Date of next review: December 2017
Ref: PI_WC_898
© The Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust

Wood pulp sourced from sustainable forests

www.pat.nhs.uk