

# Picking the right cough or flu medicine for your child

By Brian Keith Fontenot, Pharm.D.

Anyone who has strolled through the aisles of their local pharmacy has probably been overwhelmed with the abundance of over-the-counter (OTC) medications available. With so many choices, it can be difficult to know what to give a sick child. The middle-of-the-night pharmacy visit is not the time for a self-lesson on what to give a child with the cold or flu. If you know some basics in advance, you can make the trip quick and effective, just like you're hoping the effects of the medicine will be.

## **Expectorants**

Expectorants help remove mucus or phlegm from the airways and are used for "chest congestion". For an expectorant, look for the word guaifenesin in the ingredients listing. To improve the effects of the drug, guaifenesin should be administered with a large amount of water or juice.

## **Antihistamines**

Histamines are produced in the body whenever a substance causes an allergic reaction. This results in an increase in mucus secretion with symptoms of runny noses, watery eyes, and repeated sneezes. Antihistamines prevent this reaction. When you're looking for something to dry up mucus, look for these names on the ingredients: brompheniramine, chlorpheniramine, dimenhydrinate, diphenhydramine, doxylamine, and loratidine. All antihistamines are capable of causing sleepiness or drowsiness; however, loratidine is considered a "non-sedating" antihistamine as it causes less sedation than the others.

In some children, the sedating agents actually work in reverse and overstimulate children. Antihistamines can cause dry mouth, thickened respiratory-tract secretions, urinary difficulty or retention, constipation, and increased gastric reflux.

## **Cough suppressants**

Anti-tussives suppress the urge to cough, but it is important to use them correctly. Coughs come in two varieties, productive and nonproductive. Productive coughs are those in which mucus is present and should be encouraged, as they help clear the airways. Prior to using a cough suppressant, a parent should first determine if the cough is productive or nonproductive. Suppressing a productive cough could lead to pneumonia

Cough suppressant medication contains the ingredient Dextromethorphan. This works by depressing the cough center in the brain. Cough suppressants with dextromethorphan usually include the designation DM or Tuss in their labeling.

## **Analgesics/antipyretics**

For fever and pain, look for analgesics and antipyretics. Acetaminophen and ibuprofen are the listings on the label for analgesics, which alleviate pain and antipyretics, which relieve or reduce fever.

Aspirin is also available, but not recommended in children unless under the direction of a physician. Likewise, ibuprofen should not be used in children less than six months of age. If your child is under the age of two months and has a fever, call a physician immediately.

## **Decongestants**

Over-the-counter decongestants are available as pills, liquids and nasal sprays. They help relieve sinus congestion (or “stuffy” nose). Look for the name pseudoephedrine available as a tablet or liquid, or phenylephrine and oxymetolazine as nasal sprays. These agents constrict the blood vessels within the nose reducing blood flow to the engorged area and improving air movement through the nasal passage. Nasal sprays are intended to be used on a short-term basis. Prolonged use can lead to rebound congestion.

As you use these medicines to treat your child, remember that none will cure the common cold or flu. They are intended to treat the symptoms associated with the illness and to be used on a limited basis. If your child’s symptoms do not improve, see your pediatrician.

All of these medications are available as combination products, for example a decongestant/analgesic. If you are using more than one product, be sure that each of the ingredients is not present in more than one product. Always follow the recommended dose on the package. Don’t guess or estimate.

Most importantly, if you are not sure of your choice, ask your pharmacist or physician.

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