Respiratory symptoms

Respiratory symptoms include cough, sneezing, runny or blocked nose, and sore throat. Children in education and care services can have as many as 8 to 12 colds a year.

Cough is a common sign of illness in children. The most common cause of cough is an infection of the respiratory tract, like a cold.

A runny or blocked nose is a common symptom and can be caused by many different conditions or diseases. Some causes are infectious, such as a cold, the flu (influenza), COVID-19, respiratory syncytial virus, or other viral infections. Some causes are not infectious, such as allergies (hayfever) or having something stuck in the nose.

A sore throat often results from an infection with a virus. Viral sore throats are not usually serious and disappear in a few days. Bacterial sore throats can be caused by a streptococcal infection (strep throat).

How it spreads

Short-term cough can be caused by viruses that spread when infected people cough or sneeze on or near others. Long-term cough (lasting more than 3 weeks) may have other causes. For information on other things that can cause coughs, see healthdirect (healthdirect.gov.au/coughs-and-colds-in-children).

Viruses that cause a runny or blocked nose and sore throat spread by droplets in the air that contain the virus or direct contact with mucus or saliva. People get infected by:

- breathing in droplets when an infected person breathes, coughs or sneezes on them

- touching a surface contaminated with droplets – for example, hands, tissues, toys or eating utensils – and then touching their eyes, nose or mouth.

Exclusion period

If a person has respiratory symptoms (cough, sneezing, runny or blocked nose, sore throat), exclude them only if:

- the respiratory symptoms are severe, **or**

- the respiratory symptoms are getting worse (more frequent or severe), **or**

- they also have concerning symptoms (fever, rash, tiredness, pain, poor feeding).

Otherwise do not exclude.

A person often has an ongoing cough after they have recovered from a respiratory infection. If their other symptoms have gone and they feel well, they can return to the service.

Actions for educators and other staff

Follow the exclusion period in the *Staying healthy* guidelines.

Ensure staff and children have good hand and respiratory hygiene.

Ensure staff use appropriate cleaning practices, as described in the *Staying healthy* guidelines.

Actions for parents and carers

Keep your child at home until their symptoms have gone and they feel well. If your child still has a cough, but their other symptoms have gone and they feel well, they can return to the service.

Teach your child to cough into a tissue, then throw the tissue into a bin and wash their hands. If there are no tissues nearby, teach them to cough into their inner elbow instead of their hands.

Make sure your child washes their hands thoroughly and often.

Clean surfaces that your child has touched, sneezed on or coughed on to reduce the risk of spreading the infection to others at home.

See your doctor if your child's runny or blocked nose gets worse over time, or lasts for more than a week.

More information about respiratory symptoms

See healthdirect for more information on prevention, diagnosis and treatment of cough and colds in children (healthdirect.gov.au/coughs-and-colds-in-children).

To find out if a child needs medical help:

- use the online symptom checker (healthdirect.gov.au/symptom-checker)

- speak to a registered nurse by calling the 24-hour health advice hotline on 1800 022 222.