

VIBRANT HEALTH BALANCED LIVING

# natural SOLUTIONS

MAGAZINE

## Keep Kids Healthy, Naturally

By Jessica Downey

For kids, back to school means excitement and anticipation. For parents, it means colds, flus, rashes—and back to the doctor. Come September, along with their art projects and homework assignments, kids start coming home with an array of germs that leave them—and the rest of the family—sick, sapped, and cranky. However, there's no need to resign yourself to a season spent at the pediatrician's office and a medicine chest filled with prescription meds. Experts agree that using holistic, homeopathic, and alternative remedies can resolve common kid ailments. And when it comes to your kids' health, not reaching for the big pharmaceutical guns right away makes good sense.

"People naturally want to give kids medicine if they aren't feeling well because they want to help them get better," says Roy Steinbock, MD, an integrative pediatrician in Boulder, Colorado. "But illness is part of life. Suppressing symptoms at all costs is not a good approach." And while conventional medicine has plenty of merit, some treatments come with potential risks of their own and don't even get to the root of the problem, says Lawrence Rosen, MD, a pediatrician at the Whole Child Center in Oradell, New Jersey. "Medicine used to be very 'one-size-fits-all,' which doesn't treat kids most effectively," says Rosen. "It shouldn't be a decision between conventional or alternative treatments. The approach to helping kids feel better should really be integrative."

Of course, many parents feel nervous going outside the generally accepted guidelines, especially when their child gets sick. So we asked pediatricians what they deem to be the safest and most effective natural solutions for the five most common ailments. Here's what they had to say.

### Ear Infections

Often signaled by fevers, tugging at the ears, and congestion, ear infections—one of the most common of all childhood complaints—can cause excruciating pain for your kids, making it difficult not to fill that prescription for antibiotics immediately.

"Most pediatricians are taught that ear infections are best treated with antibiotics," Rosen says. But holistic practitioners and conventional pediatricians don't agree. "We want fewer antibiotics prescribed to kids," he says. What's more, studies show that antibiotics don't always work. First, many ear infections are not bacterial—and antibiotics only clear up bacterial infections. Secondly, antibiotics target bacteria indiscriminately, so they wipe out good bacteria along with the bad. And finally, growing immune systems can become dependent on the drugs, says Dana Ullman, MPH, DHM, and author of *The Homeopathic Revolution* (North Atlantic Books, 2007). "If you treat with antibiotics too soon in the inflammation process, your child's body doesn't learn to identify what has infected it. Her body then depends on the antibiotic to fight the infection for her."

Furthermore, an ear infection—viral or bacterial—will often clear up without the aid of drugs. "More than 80 percent of the time children recover from earaches just on the strength of their own immune system," says Kathi J. Kemper, MD, professor of pediatrics at Wake Forest University School of Medicine in North Carolina. However, if you and your doctor decide antibiotics are the best course, Kemper recommends simultaneously giving your children probiotics, which contain beneficial bacteria, to replace some of the good bacteria that are lost.

If you decide to steer clear of medication, try one or more of the following options to fight off ear infections.

**Willow, garlic, and mullein oil drops.**

These olive oil-based solutions contain a combination of herbs with pain-relieving, antibacterial, and antifungal properties. “The research behind these oils says they are more effective than antibiotics at treating ear infection symptoms like pain,” says Rosen. Dosages vary based on the age of your child and his symptoms, so read the label carefully or check with a holistic practitioner about how much to use.

**Homeopathy.**

“One of the principles of homeopathy is that your ear infection and my ear infection are not the same,” says Ullman. “Once a child has the conventional diagnosis, we then figure out the unique symptoms.” This means you can choose the homeopathic remedy that matches the symptoms your child has. Ullman recommends *belladonna* for children whose earaches begin with sudden, intense pain and are accompanied by a high fever, and *pulsatilla* for children who are being especially cuddly, complaining that their ear pain is worse at night, and have a yellow-to-green discharge from their nose. *Chamomilla* can help children who suffer from extreme ear pain, are irritable, and don’t want to be comforted.

**Nasal Congestion**

Many parents complain that their child’s nose is runny or congested more often than it’s clear. Congestion occurs when the membranes that line the nose swell from inflamed blood vessels, which result from colds, allergies, dry air, or dust.

Although some doctors endorse decongestants to remedy congestion, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends letting your kids heal on their own, unless they are younger than 3 months old. Steinbock agrees.

“If a kid has a runny nose, you really don’t have to treat it unless he can’t breathe.” Of course, if you get nervous, by all means call your doctor. But once you’re satisfied your little one has nothing more serious than a cold, these gentle, noninvasive choices may keep his sniffles at bay and his breathing freer.

**Humidifiers.**

Most doctors agree the first thing you can do is put a humidifier in your child’s room to increase the moisture in the air while she’s sleeping. The added moisture will loosen sinus congestion and soothe airways. German chamomile, eucalyptus, rosemary, and lavender essential oils will help kids breathe easier. Add one to two drops to the water in the humidifier before you turn it on.

**Saline nasal rinses.**

These solutions, such as Kids’ Xlear Saline Nasal Spray With Xylitol, gently clear your child’s nasal cavities of irritants, which is important because the mucus membranes are sensitive. For infants and toddlers, Steinbock recommends applying a simple saline solution followed by a gentle bulb suction.

**Hydrotherapy.**

If your congested child is older—or very cooperative—try a hydrotherapy treatment using a neti pot. This ceramic vessel designed especially for water to flow in and out of the nose allows you to pour a saltwater solution into your child’s nose and irrigate the sinuses. The water washes away allergens from nasal passages, and the salt draws fluid out of swollen mucus membranes, which helps drain the sinuses.

**Skin Rashes**

Rashes can signal any number of things—from something as serious as a spider bite to a mild allergic reaction to a new food—and because of this, they can be tough to treat. “The most common skin rash is called, ‘We don’t know what it is but it will probably disappear on its own,’” says Kemper. “The vast majority of rashes go away on their own because our immune systems are marvelous.” And the keys to a strong immune system are simple, she says: “a healthy diet, plenty of sleep, and a loving family.” Of course everyone should wash their hands frequently to keep germs at a minimum.

For more serious rashes and eczema—a common condition in infants and children that causes itching, dryness, and red or scaly rashes—doctors may suggest hydrocortisone, a topical corticosteroid that works by decreasing (or preventing) the tissues’ response

to inflammation. Since cortisone doesn't cure the eczema and can nibble at the body's ability to fight infection, try these other options first.

#### **Eco-friendly products.**

Environmental irritants include everyday products like laundry detergents, household cleaners, perfumes, face and body washes, and soaps. Switch to eco-friendly, scent-free brands of laundry detergent and bodycare products, and opt for chemical-free household cleansers.

#### **Soothing baths.**

If flare-ups occur often, give your child a bath. Soaking in a lukewarm bath of evening primrose oil for 15 to 20 minutes can help relieve itching and dryness. Try Kneipp Evening Primrose Moisture Bath and pat or air dry so the oil stays on the skin to protect and soothe.

#### **Probiotics.**

Research has shown that probiotics prevent eczema in adults and has explored their use as a treatment for the condition in infants and children.

#### **Aloe and calendula ointment.**

For other mild rashes, comfort the area without exposing your child's skin to chemicals and toxins. Aloe and calendula ointments (try Hyland's Skin Therapy) will soothe the itching and burning that often come with a rash, says Rosen, and that should keep little fingers from scratching and infecting the area.

#### **Cough & Sore Throat**

A sore throat usually indicates that a cold is coming on. During childhood your kids will likely have more colds or upper-respiratory infections than any other illness, according to the AAP. In fact, most kids have eight to 10 colds in the first two years of life. Until earlier this year, when the makers of several leading over-the-counter cold medications voluntarily withdrew products sold for infants, cough medicines were the generally accepted remedy to handle sore throats and coughs. "A lot of Western medicine isn't always tested thoroughly, which you can see from the fact that they removed all cough medicines from the shelves," Steinbock says. Steer clear of those OTCs and try these drug-free alternatives instead.

#### **Slippery elm bark.**

A number of doctors opt for an expectorant over a cough suppressant to get the mucus out of a child's system. Steinbock touts the benefits of slippery elm bark, an herb that acts as an expectorant and a demulcent, which soothes the throat. The remedy comes from the bark of an American elm, but is not considered an official drug in the US. The bark is available in powder form and can simply be mixed with hot water. If your kids turn their noses up at boiling bark, try adding a little honey. "It's a great home remedy," says Kemper.

#### **Menthol and eucalyptus.**

For kids older than 6, Kemper recommends rubbing menthol and eucalyptus on their chests.

#### **Fevers**

Fevers—even when they aren't high—can push any parent's panic button. In fact, a study released by Johns Hopkins University in May found that parents tend to overtreat even the mildest fevers. To qualify as a fever, body temperature needs to spike above 100 degrees (normal is 98.6). But a mild fever—considered somewhere between 100 degrees and 102 degrees—should not be cause for alarm. "We must remind parents that fever is a sign of the body's revved-up defenses fighting infection and that fever-reducing medications carry their own risks," says Johns Hopkins pediatrician Michael Crocetti, MD. While it can be tempting to give an uncomfortable, cranky child acetaminophen or ibuprofen every six to eight hours (kids tend to feel better when their fever is lower), Ullman cautions against the urge. "Fever up to a certain degree is beneficial," he says. "Parents shouldn't give kids acetaminophen for fevers below 103 degrees." Use the following modalities to treat a fever holistically.

**Homeopathy.**

There are three main homeopathic fever reducers, says Ullman: *belladonna*, which is used when kids display a flushed face and give off heat in response to a high, rapid-onset fever; *ferrum phos*, which helps treat mild fevers; and *aconite*, which is a homeopathic form of vitamin C. Talk to a homeopath about how to use these remedies.

**Hydrotherapy.**

Cold-water baths can be effective in bringing down high fevers, but check with your doctor first. Make sure your child drinks plenty of fluids, and call the pediatrician if her fever spikes. You can also give your little one a warm to hot footbath while placing a cold cloth on her head and wrapping her body in a blanket. This is especially good for fevers that are accompanied with headache.

**Aromatherapy.**

To help reduce fevers, dilute essential oils of bergamot, chamomile, or eucalyptus with a carrier oil before applying them as a warm compress on her forehead or chest, or having your child inhale their vapors.

Jessica Downey is a freelance writer in Pennsylvania.

**Better Than an Apple a Day**

Of course, prevention is always the best medicine. A nutrient-rich diet, adequate rest, and plenty of exercise can build up a child's immune system so she can sidestep many of the ailments that go around school. "A diet packed with legumes, omega-3 fatty acids, and whole grains is important," says Kemper. "And I think most kids need to be on a multivitamin and DHA supplement." Our favorites include:

New Chapter Organics Every Kid Multivitamin, for children 4 and up, comes in a tasty powder that our kid testers loved. (\$9.95, 7 powder pouches; [www.newchapter.com](http://www.newchapter.com))

Nordic Naturals Ultimate Omega 500, for kids 5 and older, masks the fish oil taste with a strawberry-flavored gel cap that can be swallowed or chewed. (\$29.95, 90 gel caps; [www.nordicnaturals.com](http://www.nordicnaturals.com))

Solgar lit'l squirts Chewable DHA Chewie-Gels, for children 4 and up, are fruit-punch flavored chewable gel caps. (\$21.50, 90 soft gels; [www.solgar.com](http://www.solgar.com))

American Health Chewable Wafer Probiotics, for kids 4 and older; comes in fruit flavors. (\$9.49, 100 tablets; [www.americanhealthus.com](http://www.americanhealthus.com))

© 1999-2008 Natural Solutions: Vibrant Health, Balanced Living/Alternative Medicine/InnoVision Health Media