

A photograph of a woman with dark hair, wearing a light-colored striped shirt, looking down at a young child with blonde hair lying in bed. The child is wearing a white floral top and is looking towards the camera. The background is a softly lit room with a window and a framed picture on the wall.

Natural Cold Cures

The use of drug-free treatments is on the rise, but will they really soothe sniffles, sore throats, and that cranky kid of yours? How to get relief—and stay safe.

BY LAURA BEIL

Over-the-counter cough and cold medicines for children under age 2 have been taken off the market, and the FDA is considering banning remedies up to age 11. Then there are the recalls.

Pain relievers, allergy meds, and other children's preparations seem to be pulled from store shelves alarmingly often. What's a mom of a sick kid to do? An increasing number are turning to nature's medicine cabinet, treating their families with ingredients that other cultures have used for centuries. In fact, between 20 and 40 percent of kids are receiving some form of "complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)," according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), which now has a special task force devoted to CAM.

"We doctors, in all honesty, have not been able to make kids better with traditional medicine when they have a cold," says Joshua Bernstein, M.D., a pediatrician in Asheville, NC. "Parents are seeking other avenues." The problem is, many of the "natural" products on the shelf are long on lore and short on science. When parents ask about them, Dr. Bernstein says, "I tell them there's not much data that they help." So are any of those "drug-free" remedies actually worth it? *Parenting* investigates.

Sifting through the evidence

Alternative cold remedies include herbal or homeopathic preparations, supplements, and plain old ingredients from the kitchen pantry. Herbal treatments often have their origins in plants used in traditional healing, such as echinacea, also known as the purple coneflower. For colds, echinacea is arguably the



HONEY

Just a half teaspoon of this yummy treat at bedtime can coat a scratchy throat and help a sick child over 1 make it through the night.

remedy with the longest history of use, and the most popular, reaching \$132 million in sales last year. The list of trendy cold fighters also includes zinc, garlic, ginseng, and elderberry. The catch is that many of these products have not been studied in children. Others have been tested but failed to show effectiveness, or at least failed to do so consistently. Sometimes there is evidence that a natural remedy may work in adults, but pediatricians caution against simply lowering the dosage for a child. "When it comes to herbal supplements for colds, there are no large randomized trials on children demonstrating that any known supplement is safe and effective," says Pieter Cohen, M.D., assistant professor at Harvard Medical School. "There is only early, tentative data."

The most encouraging sign came from one study that actually didn't find echinacea helpful in treating a child's cold but did hint that its use over six to eight weeks might help prevent the next one, says Kathi Kemper, M.D., author of *The Holistic Pediatrician* and head of the Center for Integrative Medicine at Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center, in Winston-Salem, NC.

Homeopathic medicines, which use highly diluted ingredients (often, but not necessarily, herbal) in an effort to stimulate the body's natural defenses, were developed in Germany about 240 years ago. These remedies also are generally on weak scien-



Wii for a while. "I want to get a big stamp that says 'Rest and fluids,'" says Vandana Bhide, M.D., a pediatrician in Saint Augustine, FL, who is certified by the American Board of Holistic Medicine. Making sure your child gets enough rest may be the most important thing you can do for him when he's sick, Dr. Bhide emphasizes.

4 Salt: A study last year in the *International Journal of Pediatric Otorhinolaryngology* found this natural anti-inflammatory can help release mucus and ease breathing, as well as soothe sore throats and coughs. For congestion, make a saline rinse with a half to a full teaspoon of salt per pint of warm water and administer it with a dropper (inexpensive saline nose rinses are also widely available). To treat a sore throat or cough, try teaching your child to gargle with the same warm saltwater solution.

5 Moist air: Either a cool-mist humidifier or a warm vaporizer in your child's bedroom can help steam-clean nasal passages, reducing congestion. (Just make sure you keep whichever model you choose clean and out of your child's reach.) You can also steam up your bathroom, then take your cranky kiddo into this homemade sauna.

6 Honey: A study in the *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* found that honey at bedtime was more effective at quieting coughs than honey-tasting cough medicine (flavored so the kids wouldn't know which they were getting). The dose is similar to that of over-the-counter cold medicines: a half teaspoon for kids ages 1 to 5, a full teaspoon



SLEEP Getting enough rest when fighting a bug may be the most important thing your child can do.

8 Relaxation: That means you, Mom! "Parents stress when their child is sick," notes Dr. Bernstein. "Meanwhile, the kid's on the floor, playing with his toys, happy as can be, with snot coming out of his nose and coughing. They often feel better than we do." Of course, if your child develops a fever or his symptoms seem to worsen, consult your pediatrician; he may have developed a secondary infection (ear, sinus) that requires an antibiotic. Otherwise, try to remember: A normal cold will run its course over a week or so, no matter what you do. If you treat it, your child will get well. If you don't treat it, he will still get well. ✨

Laura Beil's last article for Parenting was "The Truth About Food Allergies." She is a mom and health reporter in Dallas.

for 6 to 11, and two teaspoons for children 12 and up. (One caveat: Never give honey to a child under age 1; it can cause a rare but serious bacterial illness known as botulism in babies.) The study used buckwheat honey, but other kinds should work fine too, Dr. Kemper says.

7 Chicken soup: It's the go-to get-well meal for a good reason—it helps. Research has shown that chicken soup has anti-inflammatory powers that stimulate the release of mucus, reducing congestion.

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