



Mott Poll Report

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Preventing Colds in Children: Following the Evidence?

Wintertime colds are common among children, often making them feel uncomfortable and causing them to miss school or other activities. It is unclear whether parents understand how to best help their children avoid catching a cold. The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents of children age 5-12 about their strategies for preventing the common cold.

Almost all parents (99%) reported that their approach to helping their child avoid colds involves developing good personal hygiene; this approach is consistent with the science of how colds usually spread. Strategies included encouraging children to wash their hands frequently (99%) or use hand sanitizers (70%), trying to teach children not to put their hands near their mouth or nose (94%), and encouraging children to avoid sharing utensils or drinks with others (94%).

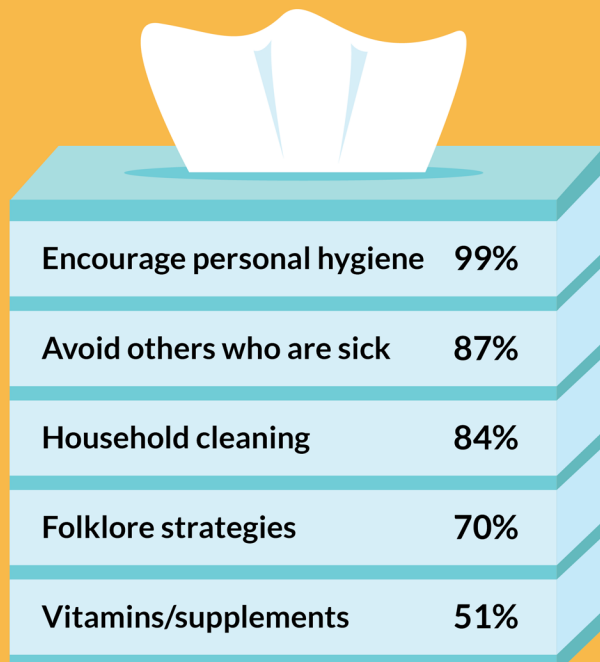
Another common approach consistent with evidence reported by 87% of parents is to keep children away from people who are already sick. For example, 64% of parents reported that they ask relatives who have colds not to hug or kiss their child, and 60% would have their child skip a playdate or activity if other children attending were ill. Some parents (31%) avoid playgrounds altogether during the cold season. Many (84%) incorporated sanitizing their child's environment as a strategy for preventing colds. Examples include more frequent washing of household surfaces (77%) and more frequent washing of toys (49%).

Half of parents (51%) reported giving their child an over-the-counter product, such as a vitamin or supplement, to prevent colds. These products generally have no or limited evidence of effectiveness in preventing colds. The most common product that parents gave their child in the past year for cold prevention was vitamin C (47%); less often, parents gave zinc (15%) or Echinacea (11%). Around 25% of parents had tried giving their child products advertised to boost their immune system.

Finally, 70% of parents reported that they try to prevent their child from catching a cold by following "folklore strategies," which are not based in science. For example, 52% of parents reported that they tell their child not to go outside with wet hair, while 48% said they encourage their child to spend more time indoors to avoid catching a cold. In contrast, 23% of parents said they encourage their child to spend more time outdoors to prevent colds.

How do parents try to prevent colds in their kids?

Percent of parents reporting strategy



Report Highlights

Almost all parents encourage personal hygiene habits (such as frequent handwashing) to prevent colds in children, consistent with scientific evidence.

Half of parents have given their child vitamins or supplements to prevent colds, despite no evidence that these products prevent colds.

Many parents still believe in non-science "folklore strategies" for cold prevention, such as not going outside with wet hair.

Data Source & Methods

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by GfK Custom Research, LLC (GfK), for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in October 2018 to a randomly selected, stratified group of parents age 18 and older (n=2,007). Adults were selected from GfK's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 60% among panel members contacted to participate. This report is based on responses from 1,119 parents who had at least one child 5-12 years. The margin of error is ±1 to 4 percentage points.

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C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health

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Implications

When children are sick with a cold, the repercussions can affect the whole family. Often, colds impede children's ability to sleep comfortably, and their desire for relief or comfort can impact the sleep of parents and other family members. When children need to stay home from school, parents may have to miss work or other obligations. On average, school-age children experience 3-6 colds per year, with some lasting as long as two weeks. As a result, it can seem to parents like their child is almost always sick during the cold season. While many parents strive to prevent their child from catching a cold, not all parents understand which strategies are evidence-based and will make a difference in cold prevention.

Colds are caused by viruses that are transmitted most frequently from person to person. The most common mechanism is from mucous droplets from the nose or mouth that pass from direct contact or through the air by sneezing or coughing and land on the hands and face, or on surfaces such as door handles, faucets, countertops and toys, or directly onto other people. Once another person touches any of those body parts or places, they can get infected by the cold virus.

Some parents in this Mott Poll report using some folklore strategies to prevent colds that have been passed down from generation to generation. These were likely started before people knew that germs were actually the cause of diseases like the common cold. As a result, families tried a lot of things to keep each other as healthy as possible—and some were effective, however with regard to preventing the common cold, spending more time indoors or outdoors or not going outside with wet hair have not been shown to actually make a difference.

Nearly half of parents gave their child some type of over-the-counter product to prevent the common cold. Despite being heavily advertised and used commonly, none have been shown to have any definitive effect on cold prevention. It is important for parents to remember that supplements and vitamins are not regulated by the US Food and Drug Administration and that the effectiveness of these products does not need to be proven for them to be sold. For example, there is no evidence that giving a child vitamin C, multivitamins or other products advertised to boost the immune system is effective in preventing the common cold.

Parents in this Mott Poll are utilizing many strategies that address the way cold viruses are transmitted. The most important of these are associated with hygiene. Making sure children wash hands frequently is a common-sense effort to control the spread of germs. The simple friction from rubbing skin against skin with soap and water, followed by rinsing and drying, is enough to get rid of most common cold germs. Hand sanitizers are also an effective way to do the trick.

Other aspects of personal hygiene include teaching children not to put their hands near their nose or mouth, and avoid sharing utensils or drinks with anyone. Children often do these things without thinking, so parents must be diligent to help children develop good hygiene habits.

Studies have shown that avoiding direct contact with others if they have cold symptoms can help decrease the transmission of cold-causing viruses. This can be difficult for parents when relatives with colds want to hug and/or kiss their child. However, explaining to family members how easily colds can be spread can help everyone to understand how to keep healthy during common cold season. It can also be hard for parents to have their child avoid all activities where they might come in contact with other kids who are sick, as they can never know who will actually attend. The best course of action is always to practice good personal hygiene to help prevent catching a cold in any situation.

The best strategy is for parents to focus their preventive efforts on decreasing the spread of the cold viruses through strong attention to hand washing and avoiding direct contact of people with colds.