



Sleep and Your Sick Child



It is a fact of parenting that somewhere along the line your little one will come down with a cough and a cold (commonly called “the flu”). Most of the time it will simply be a viral illness which will most likely manifest itself in the form of a head cold, often associated with an infected throat or infected ears, and coughing. If you are really unlucky, your baby may end up with an ear or chest infection requiring medication, and in some cases, hospitalization.

When it comes to sleep, coughs and colds can play havoc with a well-established sleep routine, or they can have the opposite effect, where your little one is feeling so poorly that they seem to do nothing else but sleep! Certain decongestant, and fever reducing medications may also make your baby drowsier than normal. If this is the case, ensure that your baby is drinking sufficient fluid (especially if she is running a temperature), as she will most likely have no appetite for food, and will appear to sleep her day away.

However, should your little one be suffering from a rotten cold, she will most likely be miserable, clingy and will wake frequently during the night. The most common reason for frequent night waking in this case is due to the fact that she may be feeling achy and sore all over, coupled with excessive mucous production (the body’s natural defense mechanism with a cold), which may be blocking her nose and sinuses, making it difficult to breathe easily. Her mouth and lips will be dry and parched, and her throat will most likely be feeling like she has swallowed a box of razor blades! Small wonder that she is restless and fretful during the night.

Expect many disturbed nights whilst the cold runs its course, so try and cancel any unnecessary outings or events during this time, and do your best to keep your child well nourished and hydrated. If your baby is eating solid food, she will probably be off her food, so try to stick to small, frequent, nutrient dense foodstuffs such as chicken or meat broth, veggie and fruit puree or egg. Encourage plenty of fluids. If she has tonsillitis or a bad throat, offer her smoothies in place of solid food.

Keep up with pain and fever- reducing medication as prescribed by your health care provider – think about how grotty you feel and how your body aches when you have a bad cold! Bath your baby twice a day, especially if she is running a fever – this will help to cool her down and will help her to settle for the night.

If she is very bunged up in her nasal and sinus passages, keep a humidifier in her room and put her to sleep in an upright position to help the mucous to drain. Keep her lips moistened with a bit of vaseline or lip balm. Offering her frequent sips of water (add a bit of honey and lemon if she is older than 1 year) will help to alleviate an irritating cough. Your baby may need to be with you in your bed if you are worried about her breathing, and if she has a very high temperature. For older babies (over the age of two), a cough suppressant may be advised if there is no chest congestion, but please ask your health care provider first before giving this to your child – this may help alleviate that irritating tickle throughout the night which may be keeping the household awake. If your baby has croup (a viral infection of the larynx, or wind pipe), this is usually worse at night. Running the hot water tap on full in the shower and sitting in the steamy bathroom area (not the shower!) with your child will help alleviate the spasm. If it does not help, seek medical attention immediately.

Important Tips

The good news, however, is that coughs and colds do resolve within a few days. You may well spend a few nights patrolling the passages, dispensing medicine, wiping snotty noses and dishing out many hugs! The important issues are to:

- keep your baby hydrated by offering small, frequent feeds – don’t stress about solid food at this stage

- use medication strictly as prescribed by your health care provider, and avoid over the counter cold and flu remedies
- treat a high temperature (anything over 38 o c) with paracetamol and tepid sponging down – seek medical help if these measures are not effective within ½ hour
- seek medical attention immediately if your baby is having difficulty breathing, or if her general condition deteriorates rapidly

You will know when your child is well again, so if sleep habits have shifted enormously, it may well be time to revert back to your previous tried and tested routine and boundaries regarding sleep.

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