

As the winter is upon us and it seems like your child has a cold every week, I am sure you feel uncertain about how to care for your child. Many parents I encounter are unsure of when to have their child evaluated due to a fever, cough or cold. Even more parents are unsure of why they sometimes receive antibiotics from their Pediatrician and other times they are not given any medicine to help their child feel better. Well, hopefully this article will shed some light on your confusion.

First of all, most of the illnesses that children experience during the winter are due to viral infections. Viruses are microorganisms smaller than bacteria that invade living cells and use the machinery of the cells to survive and replicate. Viruses are unable to grow or reproduce outside of a living cell. Viruses that invade humans are killed by the immune system of the human and are not killed by antibiotics. Common childhood viral infections include: upper respiratory infections, like the common cold, influenza, some pneumonias and the chickenpox. For viral infections, you should use supportive measures to help your child feel better while the body is fighting the infection.

Bacteria, on the other hand, are organisms that can invade the human body and cause infection. Bacteria are able to survive in and out of living cells. Bacterial infections are best killed with antibiotics. Common childhood bacterial infections include ear infections, strep throat, some pneumonias and skin infections. So, your child should only receive antibiotics for a documented bacterial infection.

Fever is a normal response of the body to the invasion of bacteria or viruses. Fever is not harmful to children and should not be feared. Most children feel their worse during the time when their temperature is up, so it is helpful to use acetaminophen or ibuprofen when your child has a temperature greater than 100.4 degrees Celsius. **Do not give aspirin to children.** You should make sure that your child drinks plenty of fluids and gets plenty of rest while sick. It is totally acceptable to monitor your child at home for 3-4 days while treating their fever before visiting your Pediatrician. You should visit your Pediatrician sooner if your child complains of specific pain (i.e ear pain, throat pain etc.), has fevers unresponsive to fever reducers, or seems to be getting progressively worse. Over the counter cold and cough remedies are not recommended for children under the age of six. After the age of six, these medicines should be used in rare instances since they do not help the body fight the invading organism. You should also teach your child to practice good hand-washing during their illness to help prevent the spread of their infection.