

# Preventing colds: Knowing what works



## Poll report

Poll 15, August 2019

Dr Anthea Rhodes, Director

### Report highlights

- Most parents don't realise how common colds are in healthy children – with only one in ten parents (10%) aware that, on average, a preschool-aged child has at least six colds per year.
- Less than half (46%) of parents know that frequent handwashing is the most effective way to reduce the chance of catching a cold.
- Sixty per cent of parents report giving their child over-the-counter products such as vitamins and supplements to prevent colds, despite a lack of scientific evidence that these products prevent colds.
- Many Australian parents engage in myth-based strategies to prevent colds, such as not going to bed with wet hair (54%), or not going outside with bare feet (44%).
- One in eight (13%) parents report giving their child antibiotics to reduce their chances of getting a cold, even though colds are caused by viruses and will not respond to treatment with antibiotics.

Colds are common in children, particularly during winter. They can result in children feeling unwell and missing school, preschool or other activities. They can also lead to time off work for parents and carers. We asked Australian parents (n=1990) a series of questions to explore their knowledge about what works when it comes to preventing colds and their strategies to help prevent their child from catching a cold.

### How colds are spread

There are more than 200 different viruses that can cause a cold. These viruses can spread from infected people to others through the air and close personal contact. Nasal secretions of people with colds can contain large amounts of cold virus. When an infected person coughs or sneezes, droplets containing the cold virus are expelled into the air. People can catch a cold if they breathe in air contaminated with a cold virus. Cold viruses can also contaminate objects and surfaces in the environment and then transfer onto a person's hands as a result of touching the contaminated surfaces. When people with colds touch their nose, cold viruses can transfer onto their hands and then be passed onto others through hand-to-hand contact or via contaminated surfaces. Young children are particularly susceptible to catching colds as they are still building up their immunity and they frequently touch their nose and mouth. There is no vaccine to protect people from the common cold.

### Knowing how many colds children typically get

Most parents do not realise that colds are very common in healthy children. Only 10% of parents are aware that, on average, preschool-aged children get at least six colds per year. More than a third (35%) of parents incorrectly believe that children who get more than a couple of colds a year have a weak immune system.

### Actions parents take to reduce the chances of their child getting a cold

#### Encouraging personal hygiene

Almost all parents (97%) report encouraging one or more personal hygiene habits in their child to reduce the chances of their child getting a cold (see *figure 1*). These include encouraging frequent handwashing (93%) or use of hand sanitiser (58%), avoiding sharing food utensils and drinks (80%) and not putting their hands in their nose or mouth (78%). These strategies are effective in reducing the spread of colds.

## Strategies parents use to try to prevent colds in children

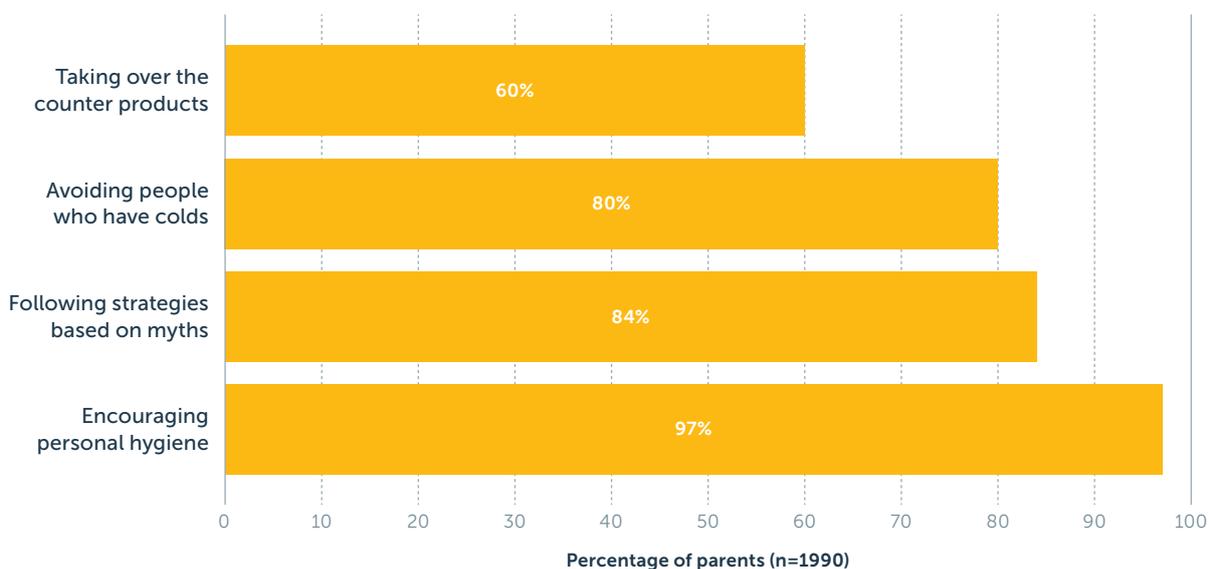


Figure 1.

Three out of four (76%) parents incorrectly believed that hands need to be washed with antibacterial soap to reduce the chance of getting a cold. In fact, cold viruses are removed by the mechanical action of washing and ordinary soaps and detergents are just as effective.

### Following myth-based strategies

Many parents report following strategies based on myths to prevent their child from catching a cold. These strategies have no scientific evidence. Four in five parents (84%) report using one or more myth-based strategies for cold prevention including; staying warm (79%), avoiding going to bed with wet hair (54%), not going outside with bare feet (44%) or wet hair (39%), or staying indoors (25%). Many of these commonly used non-scientific strategies have been passed down in families from generation to generation. Frequently, these strategies were developed before it was well understood that colds are caused by viruses. Spending more time indoors, staying warm and not going outside or to bed with wet hair or bare feet have not been shown to reduce the chances of catching a cold.

### Avoiding people who are sick

Many parents report trying to limit their child's exposure to sick people to prevent colds. Eighty per cent of parents say they keep their child away from people who seem to have colds, 61% of parents report asking friends or relatives who have colds not to kiss or hug their child and 58% have their child skip playdates or activities with

other children who have colds. A quarter of parents (27%) say they have kept their child home from school, preschool or childcare if other children in the class are sick. Some parents (16%) report avoiding playgrounds all together to reduce their child's chances of getting a cold.

### Taking over-the-counter products

Sixty per cent of parents report giving their child one or more over-the-counter products, such as vitamins or supplements, to reduce their chances of getting a cold in the past year. These products generally have no or limited scientific evidence of effectiveness in preventing colds, and can be costly for families. The most common products used include vitamin C (45%) and multivitamins (39%) (see figure 2).

### Confusion about colds and antibiotics

Colds are caused by viruses. Antibiotics can be used to treat infections that are caused by bacteria, but they are not effective in treating infections caused by viruses. This means that antibiotics do not work to prevent or treat the common cold, or the flu. One in four (25%) parents incorrectly believe that taking antibiotics may stop a cold from turning into the flu. And one in eight (13%) parents report giving their child antibiotics to reduce their chances of getting a cold. In addition to being ineffective against colds, inappropriate use of antibiotics creates an unnecessary cost for families, exposes children to the risk of side effects and contributes to the problem of antibiotic resistance.

## Over-the-counter products parents report giving children to prevent a cold in the past year

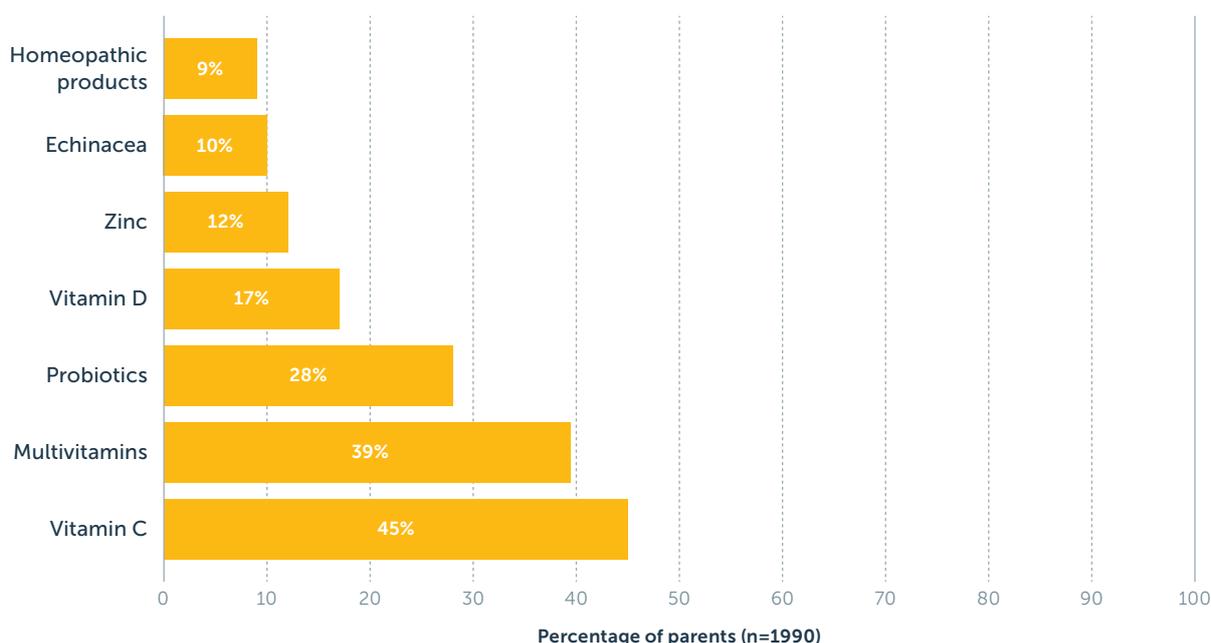


Figure 2.

## Strategies parents believe to be the most effective in preventing colds in children

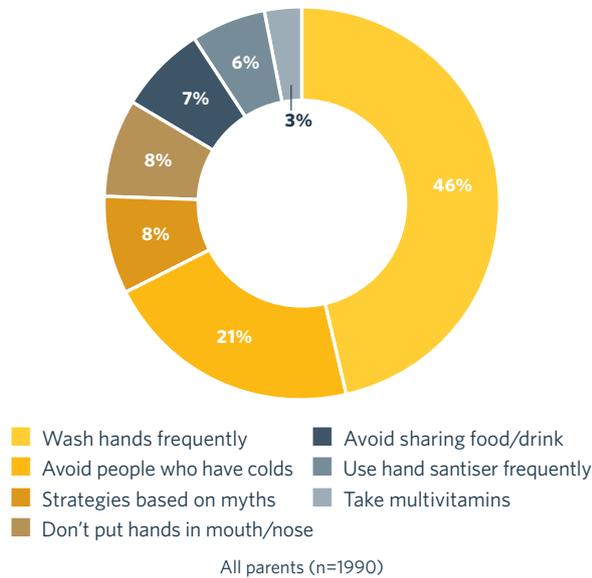


Figure 3.

## Knowing what works best to prevent colds

While the vast majority of parents (91%) know that there are effective things they can do to try to reduce the chances of their child catching a cold, only half of parents (52%) are aware that frequent hand washing or use of hand sanitiser is the most effective strategy for cold prevention (see *figure 3*). One in five (21%) rated avoiding people with colds as the number one strategy for cold prevention, while this is also effective, cold viruses can be spread via contaminated surfaces, so avoiding sick people will not completely eliminate the chance of catching a cold. A quarter (27%) of parents were not aware that some cold viruses can live for up to a day on surfaces.

Sometimes people can spread a cold before their symptoms become obvious or they may be participating in activities when they are only mildly unwell but are still able to spread the virus. Half of parents (48%) report sending their child to school, kindergarten or child care with a cold in the last year.

The minority of parents felt strategies based on myths such as staying warm, staying indoors or not going out at night were the most effective cold prevention strategies.

## Implications

Colds are common in children, particularly during winter, and can have a significant impact on family function, through disrupted sleep, missed school and preschool and associated time off work for parents. On average, preschool-aged children experience at least six 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. This study suggests the majority of parents are not aware just how common colds are in healthy children, with many incorrectly believing frequent colds are due to a weak immune system. This misbelief may affect parents' actions when trying to prevent colds.

Many parents strive to prevent their child from catching a cold, but not all parents understand which strategies are evidence-based and most effective in cold prevention. The majority of parents do follow evidence-based strategies to help their children to avoid catching or spreading the common cold, such as encouraging good use of personal hygiene measures and avoiding close contact with unwell people. However, many parents are also using myth-based practices such as staying indoors and avoiding going to bed or outside with wet hair or bare feet. While these approaches are unlikely to cause harm, there is also no evidence they will have any benefits. This study shows that some parents believe these non-evidence-based strategies are more effective than scientifically proven approaches for cold prevention.

Around half of parents report giving their child supplements or vitamins for cold prevention. These products may be heavily advertised and commonly used, but have not been independently shown to have definitive effects on cold prevention. They can be costly for parents and are not regulated by the Therapeutic Goods Administration. This study also highlights ongoing confusion among parents when it comes to antibiotics and colds. Colds are caused by viruses and do not respond to antibiotics, yet a concerning number of parents report they have given their child antibiotics to prevent a cold.

While many parents try 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. Parents should be encouraged to focus cold prevention efforts on ensuring frequent and effective hand washing and, where possible, avoiding direct contact with people with colds.

## Data source

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne.

The survey was administered from January 30 to February 25, 2019, to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults aged 18 and older (n=1990). All respondents were parents or caregivers to children aged between one month and less than 18 years. Respondents provided data on a collective total of 3630 children aged between one month and less than 18 years.

The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect the structure of the Australian population using figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Among Online Research Unit panel members contacted to participate the completion rate was 77%.

## References

For full reference list please contact:  
[child.healthpoll@rch.org.au](mailto:child.healthpoll@rch.org.au)

## Suggested citation

The Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll (2019). Preventing colds: Knowing what works. Poll Number 15. The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria.

**Less than half**  
of parents know that  
hand washing is the best  
way to prevent a cold.

