

## Media release

### Parents confused about how best to prevent colds in kids

According to new findings from The Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll, Australian parents are confused about how best to prevent their child from catching a cold with many opting to follow myth-based strategies, or give their child unnecessary vitamins or supplements.

The poll of 1990 parents who care for 3630 children aged one month to less than 18 years found:

- Less than half of parents (46%) know that frequent handwashing is the most effective way to prevent catching a cold
- The vast majority of parents are unaware of just how common a cold is with only one in ten parents (10%) knowing that, on average, a preschool aged child has at least six colds a year. More than a third of parents (35%) incorrectly believe that children who get more than a couple of colds a year have a weak immune system
- Sixty per cent of parents are giving their child over-the-counter products such as vitamins or supplements to aid cold prevention, with vitamin c the most popular, even though there is no scientific proof that these products will stop a child from catching a cold.
- Worryingly, one in eight parents (13%) report giving their child antibiotics as a measure to prevent catching a cold and one in four parents (25%) believe that taking antibiotics can stop a cold turning into the flu. The cold is a virus and does not respond to antibiotics

The RCH Poll found one of the most commonly used strategies to prevent children from catching a cold is avoiding people who have colds, with a quarter of parents (27%) indicating they have kept their child home from school, preschool or childcare if other children in the class are unwell. Sixty-one per cent of parents have asked friends or relatives who have a cold to not kiss or hug their child and 58% of parents have skipped playdates or activities with other children who have a cold.

The study also found a significant proportion of parents (84%) still follow strategies based on myths to prevent their child from catching a cold despite there being no evidence to show they reduce the chance of catching a cold. Examples include:

- Staying warm (79%)
- Avoiding going to bed with wet hair (54%)
- Not going outside with bare feet (44%)
- Not going outside with wet hair (39%)
- Staying indoors (25%)

Promisingly, the poll found almost all parents (97%) are encouraging one or more personal hygiene habits in their child to reduce the chance of catching a cold including avoiding sharing food utensils and drinks (80%) and not putting their hands in their nose or mouth (78%).

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But, three-quarters of parents (76%) incorrectly believe that hands need to be washed with antibacterial soap. In fact, cold viruses are removed by the mechanical action of washing hands and ordinary soaps or detergents are just as effective.

The RCH Poll was conducted in February 2019 and data were weighted to reflect the Australian population.

### **Quotes attributable to the Director of the RCH National Child Health Poll, Dr Anthea Rhodes**

“Frequent handwashing is the most effective way to prevent catching a cold. Despite what many might think, you do not need antibacterial soap as part of your routine, ordinary soap or detergent is just as effective. It’s the mechanical movement of handwashing that removes the cold virus.”

“Colds are caused by viruses and are spread from infected people to others usually by direct contact with airborne droplets or via a surface contaminated with those droplets. It’s important to remember that antibiotics have no role in preventing or treating colds because they do not work to treat viral infections. Not only are they ineffective, but inappropriate treatment with antibiotics puts a child at risk of side effects, and also contributes to antibiotic resistance.”

“While myth-based strategies like staying indoors or not going to bed with wet hair are not harmful tactics, they also have not been shown to reduce the chances of catching a cold. Frequent hand washing has been shown to be the most effective way to prevent catching a cold.”

“It’s common for parents to give their child over-the-counter products such as vitamins and supplements in an attempt to prevent colds. These have not been proven to make a difference in preventing a cold and are an unnecessary cost for parents.”

“Having a cold now and then is unavoidable and can help a child building their immune system. But it can also be a nuisance, cause discomfort and mean time off work and school. The best way to reduce the chances of catching a cold is good hygiene. Wash hands, clean contaminated surfaces, and avoid people who are sick when you can.”