

Staying Healthy during the winter – A Focus on Your Lungs

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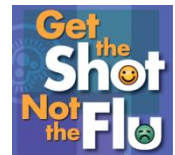
MECP2 syndrome.

With the winter comes the cold and flu season. Many people have respiratory infections during the winter months, in part because the cold weather and holiday season bring more people together inside. What can be a simple cold for many people, can be very hard on someone with lung or neuromuscular problems such as our children with Rett or

MECP2 syndrome. It is easy to pass on germs by shaking hands, kissing, and most of the time germs are passed from the hands. A person who has an infection touches his or her nose or face and then has germs that get passed from the hands to another person or surface. Many germs live only a short time on surfaces but it is a good idea to keep them clean. Keep equipment used for breathing treatments or other care clean too. Most can be washed with soap and water or ask your health care provider the best way to clean.

You should keep hand sanitizer on hand and use it regularly. Be picky about visitors and insist on good hand washing. If someone is ill, even a home nurse, he or she should stay away or if they have to be around your child, wear a mask and wash hands often. Avoid crowds if possible. A cough that a person does not cover can spread germs several feet! Use the 'bicycle rule' – stay at least 6 feet from someone who is coughing or sneezing. Children who have been very ill may stay in homebound school status during the high risk months but this has to be balanced with home care resources as well. Good nutrition also helps fight infection.

The influenza vaccine ('flu shot') is a good idea for everyone but especially for those who help care for a person at high risk. Even though there are already some cases of flu in the community, it is not too late to get your flu vaccine. A new shot is needed each year because the flu viruses can change and extra protection is needed. If you have concerns about getting the vaccine, talk to your health care provider. Many people who even have egg allergy can take the vaccine safely. There are few viruses that we have this protection for and this is one virus that can make you very sick.



Bacteria also cause infections and at times take advantage of a person who is already ill with a virus. Children with Rett or MECP2 who have seizures can have more seizures with fever or the stress of illness and may not protect their airways as well. Aspiration is a common cause of bacterial pneumonia. Those who do not swallow well are also at higher risk of aspiration; more so when sick with a cold or upper respiratory infection as they cannot handle the extra mucus.

You need to be careful about use of cough suppressants. They do not often work very well and can cause side effects. It is not always good to suppress a cough that indicates mucus needs to come up and out. Guaifenesin is a medicine that you can buy over the counter (OTC) that may help you cough out mucus and may reduce cough. It sometimes comes in combination



with other medicines so check the label. Always check for any drug interactions before giving your child OTC medications. For more information on cough go to www.thoracic.org/patients (American Thoracic Society).

Many children can have an impaired cough. They are not strong enough or coordinated to cough up mucus well. Some can be helped with a suction machine to help get out what is in the mouth and throat. But if they can't get it up to be suctioned there are other things to try. Nebulizer (breathing treatments) that have saline to thin mucus may help some. Chest clapping helps get mucus to the bigger airways.

Special equipment including a percussive vest and cough assist device can be helpful. You can learn more about these and whether they can help your child from your health care provider or lung specialist. Some children really benefit from having a daily airway clearance program with treatments 2-3 times per day. Doing treatments as soon as a cough or infection starts helps keep ahead of mucus too.

It is not possible to avoid all colds but you can take steps to reduce the risk and help illnesses from becoming more severe. While infections can come at any time, taking special care in the winter months is a good idea for everyone.