

## HEALTHWATCH: COLDS AND COUGHS

**Ann Pinning, Parish Nurse**

Many of us have already been hit with upper respiratory ailments this Fall. Sometimes it's difficult to know when to seek medical attention. Here is some basic information to help you navigate through the coughs and sniffles of the sick season.

**Colds** are caused by one of 200 viruses. That is why it is not unusual for a young child starting school to have a cold twice a month during the Fall and Winter months. The symptoms of a cold generally appear gradually and may include nasal stuffiness, sneezing, sore throat, productive cough, mild fatigue, and on occasion a low grade fever. Symptoms are worst during the first 3-5 days and then gradually subside by 7-14 days.

**Bronchitis** is an infection of the bronchial tree (the tubes that carry air to your lungs). The bronchioles become irritated, swell and mucus is formed. Most (90%) bronchitis is caused by a virus and typically may develop at the end of a cold just as you think you are starting to improve. Symptoms include chest discomfort and/or tightness, wheeze, cough which may produce mucus, and sometimes fever. As with a cold, fevers in viral bronchitis will generally last less than 3 days, and symptoms of cough, nasal stuffiness, and muscle aches will improve by the seventh day. A minor cough may persist for 3 weeks, however.

**Pneumonia** develops when the infection reaches the lung. Generally with pneumonia there will be more chest pain with coughing, increased shortness of breath, fatigue, and persistent fevers. The cough from pneumonia may persist for up to 6 weeks, even after treatment.

### **Seek medical attention if:**

- Fevers persist more than 3 days, or if fever is above 102 and *doesn't respond to fever reducers*. With a viral upper respiratory infection, fevers generally last less than 72 hours and are low grade, under 102.
- Cold and cough symptoms last longer than 2 weeks, worsen after day 5, or have not improved by day 7.
- You are short of breath or have labored breathing
- You experience chest pain with coughing.
- You develop a stiff neck, unusual sleepiness or confusion.

### **Because most respiratory infections are viral, antibiotics are usually not indicated. The best home treatments include:**

- Acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Motrin/Advil) for fever or pain.
- Drink lots of fluids (6-8 glasses daily)—this helps to thin mucus.
- Saline nasal spray (use several times daily to flush out the nose—works well for children of any age). This helps to mobilize the nasal cilia (hairs) that keep the nasal tract clean.
- Over the counter remedies such as nasal decongestants or cough medicines are beneficial in only 50% of patients and are not recommended for children under age six.
- Cool mist humidifier or vaporizer.
- Avoid smoking and second hand smoke—smoke kills the protective hairs (cilia) in your respiratory tract that help keep it free from infection.
- Get plenty of rest and eat a healthy diet—this helps to boost your immune system
- Don't forget to cover your cough and wash your hands!