

What's really causing their sniffles?

For millions of kids, indoor allergies—not colds—are to blame. Here's how to distinguish.

There's no doubt that colds are a top health concern for children: The average school-age child in the United States contracts 6 to 10 of these viral infections every winter. But health experts say that for 15 percent of kids under 18, the far bigger cause of seasonal sniffing is an indoor allergy to substances such as dust mites, mold and pet dander. "I estimate that up to 40 percent of children with indoor allergies are not properly diagnosed because they are assumed to have a cold," reports John Bosso, M.D., medical director of Allergy & Asthma Consultants in West Nyack, New York. Here, four key questions that help identify the *true* culprit.



Did several symptoms appear simultaneously?

If yes, the problem is likely an allergy. Exposure to an allergen causes the immune system's mast cells (which are found throughout skin and mucous membranes) to release histamine in a spontaneous burst, explains Dr. Bosso. This inflammatory chemical can trigger symptoms such as sneezing, runny nose and watery eyes all at once. On the other hand, a cold virus moves through the body slowly, producing new symptoms over several days.

Are symptoms worse in the morning?

Kids with indoor allergies are usually most miserable when they first wake up, according to a study at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. Blame it on prolonged contact with the dust mites that hide in bedding and stuffed animals, as well as mold spores that can accumulate in bedroom humidifiers. With a cold, however, discomfort tends to peak in the evening. "Levels of the stimulating hormone cortisol naturally drop at night," says Dr. Bosso. "This dip allows for the enhanced release of *cytokines*, immune proteins that intensify fever, aches and other viral symptoms."

Is nasal discharge clear to slightly cloudy?

Mucus produced during an allergic response tends to be fairly clear and thin, say experts at the National Institutes of Health. This is mucus in its "pure" state—secreted directly into nasal passages in an effort to physically expel the irritating substance. But with a cold, mucus tends to take on a yellowish or greenish tint within a day or two. Studies show that this signals the presence of an enzyme produced by antiviral white blood cells.

Does your child's nose have a crease?

The histamine released during an allergic reaction can cause intense nasal itchiness (a symptom uncommon with colds). In an effort to relieve the sensation, many children forcefully rub their noses upward with their palms. According to a study in *The Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*, this can create a faint line across the tip of the nose, a telltale marking dubbed the "allergic crease." (It should fade once the rubbing stops.) 🌸

TIPS FOR TARGETED RELIEF

To ease allergies: Launder bedding and stuffed toys on your washer's hottest setting since heat kills dust mites. For extra insurance, try adding 10 drops of eucalyptus oil (like Now Eucalyptus Oil, \$6 for 1 oz., at GNC.com), a natural mite killer, to the load with your regular detergent. If your child sleeps with a humidifier, protect against mold buildup by cleaning it once weekly with a mixture of one part bleach and four parts water. If allergy flare-ups recur, consider giving her an antihistamine (like Children's Claritin, \$10 for 10 chewable tablets, at drugstores).

To ease a cold: Serve chicken soup. Research suggests that compounds in the broth can curtail cold symptoms by dampening activity of inflammatory *neutrophils*. Also helpful: Have your child inhale steam for 10 minutes twice a day, which is proven to break up thick nasal congestion. And once he's ready to return to school, give him a bottle of hand sanitizer. In one study, use of sanitizing gels reduced student sick days by nearly 20 percent.

