

An FDA advisory panel has recommended that children under 6 should not be given over the counter cold remedies, including cough medicine. They also recommended that studies be done to evaluate the effectiveness and safety of these products for children from age 2 to 12.

For years, safety watch dog groups have been asking the FDA to exert tighter controls on the use of over the counter (OTC) products. Finally it is starting to listen, but for the children who have died from these products, it is a little too late. Granted, the risk of death is low, only a very small percentage of children who have used these drugs have had serious side effects. The point of this article is not to illustrate the safety issue, but to point out the lack of effectiveness of these products.

First it is important to understand that there is little research that these medicines do any good for your children. One study showed that a glass of water was more effective than cough medicine in reducing coughing. Another study revealed that those who take cough medicine had an increased risk of developing pneumonia. It is commonly accepted in the health care community that fever is an important tool the body uses to fight infection, so medicine that reduces fever actually works against the body's defenses.

It is even more important to understand that none of these medications speed recovery. At best, they reduce unpleasant symptoms. Most illnesses for which these medicines are used are caused by viruses. There are no OTC medicines that eliminate viruses from the body. That is a job that the body will do on its own. In fact, often the unpleasant symptom is a natural body response to help eliminate the illness. Coughing expels fluids from the lungs that need to come out. Diarrhea and vomiting expell harmful substances from the digestive tract. Fever improves the body's defense against germs. Mucus build-up in the sinus passages is a natural immune response that helps the body trap and eliminate germs.

Certainly these symptoms are unpleasant, but they are often necessary to aid in the recovery processes. Suppressing the symptom, simply to make you or your child feel better, may actually make the illness worse and delay recovery. Next time you or your child has a cold or the flu, follow your grand mother's advice; rest, drink fluids and have some chicken soup. These are the time proven methods of assisting the healing process.

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