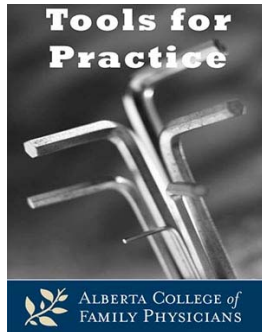


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Pediatric Cough: Do Honey or OTC cough suppressants help?

Clinical Question: Do Over-The-Counter (OTC) cough suppressants or Honey improve cough due to Upper Respiratory Tract Infection (URTI) in children?

Evidence:

A systematic review of OTC cough suppressants and one Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT) of honey address this question.

- **OTC Cough Suppressants:** A 2008 Cochrane systematic review¹ considered 8 RCT with 616 children. Studies were done primarily in pediatric/primary clinics and were generally poor quality (for example, limited assurance of randomization). Mean ages were 2 to 7.5 years across studies.
 - o Outcomes included cough scores, number of patients who were cough free, patient rated improvement/satisfaction and parent evaluations.
 - o Statistical improvements were very infrequent, not consistent and of doubtful clinical significance.
- **Honey:** One RCT of 105 kids, mean age 5: one night-time dose of honey, Dextromethorphan (DM), or nothing.²
 - o Authors report honey best because statistically significant improvement in:
 - 5 out of 5 different cough/sleep scores, Honey > DM > nothing.
 - In 2 out 5 paired comparison, honey statistically > "nothing"
 - o **BUT:** Neither the honey nor DM patients attained the study defined clinically important improvement.
 - o Methodological issues include randomization not assured, funding by the Honey Board & none of the comparisons reached clinical significance.
 - o Cochrane reviews felt there is insufficient evidence to recommend for or against honey for pediatric URTI cough.³

Context:

- Other reviews agree the evidence does not support OTC cough suppressants in pediatric cough.⁴
- Due to poor evidence of benefit and possible harms, Health Canada⁵ has stated that OTC cough and cold medicines should not be used in children under 6.
- Honey should not be used in children in age ≤ 1 due to risk of infantile botulism.

Bottom-line: OTC cough suppressants should not be used in children under 6 and do not appear to be effective in older children. There is insufficient evidence to support the use of honey in acute pediatric cough.

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1. [Cochrane 2008; 1: CD001831.](#)
2. [Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med 2007;161:1140-6.](#)
3. [Cochrane 2010; 1: CD007094.](#)
4. [J Fam Pract. 2009;58\(10\):559a-c.](#)
5. [Am Fam Physician. 2007;75\(4\):515-20.](#)

Tools for Practice is a biweekly article summarizing medical evidence with a focus on topical issues and practice modifying information. It is coordinated by G. Michael Allan, MD, CCFP and the content is written by practising family physicians. Archived articles are available on the Toward Optimized Practice and ACFP websites.

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