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Cold & Flu Health Center

Vicks VapoRub Misuse May Hurt Kids

18-Month-Old Girl Hospitalized After Vicks VapoRub Put Under Her Nose

By [Daniel J. DeNoon](#)
WebMD Health NewsReviewed by [Louise Chang, MD](#)

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Jan. 13, 2009 – Misuse of Vicks VapoRub may have landed an 18-month-old girl in the hospital, Wake Forest University researchers suggest.

The previously healthy girl had an upper respiratory infection, for which her grandparents treated her with a dab of Vicks VapoRub under the nose. In about half an hour, the child began to struggle for breath, and she was taken to the emergency room.

Bruce K. Rubin, MD, professor of pediatrics at Wake Forest's Brenner Children's Hospital, suggests the grandparents' misuse of Vicks VapoRub may very well have caused the girl's respiratory distress.

"It was summertime, and this child had a virus, but she was disproportionately sick and was not getting better despite treatment [with rescue inhaler and steroids]," Rubin tells WebMD. "Juan Carlos Abanes, MD, was the resident in the emergency room and he went back to the grandparents and asked if there was anything that could have caused this. They said she was doing well until they put a little Vicks under her nose, and pretty soon after she had [trouble breathing](#)."

Abanes called Rubin, a lung specialist. Rubin had never heard of Vicks VapoRub causing such a problem, but he knew the product was labeled for use only in children older than 2 years – and that the product should never be applied to the nostrils.

Rubin told Abanes to stop treatment, as the effects of a local irritant such as Vicks VapoRub should wear off. Sure enough, supplemental oxygen was all the girl needed to get better. She was released from the hospital the next day.

"I think this girl was exquisitely sensitive to Vicks," Rubin says. "In some people Vicks VapoRub causes a [rash](#). This was a girl who was sensitive to Vicks, and had a virus, and inhaled the Vicks and it tipped her over."

That was three years ago. Since then, Rubin says, he and his colleagues have seen three other young children with upper respiratory infections and unusually severe breathing trouble – and whose parents had inappropriately treated them with Vicks VapoRub. All recovered.

Vicks VapoRub Studies

To find out whether Vicks VapoRub might possibly harm airways, Rubin and colleagues performed a series of experiments on ferrets, whose airway anatomy and biology resemble that of humans. The experiments suggested that Vicks VapoRub could possibly act as an irritant causing mucus to block airways.

How convincing are the studies? WebMD asked Daniel Craven, MD, a pediatric lung specialist at University Hospitals Case Medical Centers Rainbow Babies and Children's Hospital, Cleveland.

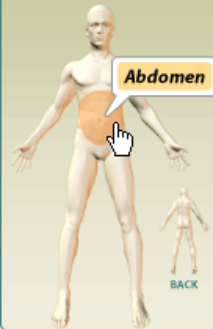
"Dr. Rubin is an established expert in this field, and what they found lends support to looking at this further," Craven tells WebMD. "By itself, though, this finding isn't very concerning. If there are harmful effects from Vicks VapoRub, they probably are mild and only seen in certain situations with intense exposure of the airways under conditions where the airways are already compromised."

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