



PARENTING EDUCATION

Common Childhood Illnesses

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Young children are susceptible to a variety of illnesses. The most frequent symptoms seen in children include: fever, colds, vomiting and diarrhea.

Fever:

Fever is a body temperature of 100.4 F or greater. Fever is a sign that your child has an infection. It frequently occurs with minor illnesses such as colds or ear infections. It can also occur with more serious illnesses. Fever tells us only that there is an infection, and does not tell us how serious the infection is. The degree of fever does not necessarily relate to the severity of the infection. A mild infection, such as a simple cold may result in a high fever. When your child has a fever, the most important thing for you to do is to watch for other symptoms. How does your child look? If your child is having periods of playfulness and does not look terribly ill, then it is most likely that the fever is not because of anything serious. The fever itself is not harmful to the child. On rare occasions, a child with a rapid onset of fever may have a seizure lasting a few minutes. If this happens, the child should be seen immediately to be certain other causes for seizures are not present (ex. meningitis).

Methods:

There are 3 ways to take a temperature: orally, rectally, and axillary. Axillary (in the arm pit) is considered the safest way to take a young child's temperature.

Treatment:

1. Fluids are the most important need for a child with a fever. Offer small amounts of fluids frequently gradually increasing the amount as tolerated.
2. Acetaminophen is appropriate every 4-6 hours. Be sure to check dosage recommendations. (Tylenol, or Generic store brands) Ibuprofen could be used as an alternative to Acetaminophen. (Motrin, or Generic store brands).
3. Cooling of skin can be accomplished by dressing the child lightly, and avoiding heavy blankets. If a child's temperature is over 103 F in spite of giving Tylenol (wait about an hour), then sponging the child can be a very useful method for decreasing the temperature. This can be done either with a washcloth with lukewarm water, or in a bathtub with lukewarm water in it. Do not use ice, ice water, alcohol, or hot water. Sponging or bathing the child over a thirty minute period is very effective in reducing the temperature. Do not do this if it makes your child more uncomfortable or if shivering should occur.

Call your healthcare provider if:

1. Your child acts extremely ill despite treatment
2. The fever persists longer than 72 hours
3. Your child is less than 3 months old
4. The fever is accompanied by any other symptoms such as rash, pain, difficulty breathing, persistent vomiting, bloody diarrhea, weight loss, convulsion, stiff neck, delirium, etc.

Colds:

Most children will develop between two and eight colds each year. Some children seem to have “bad” years with continuous colds and “good” years with only one to two colds.

Symptoms associated with common colds: Most symptoms last 7 to 14 days. Clear, watery discharge from the nose, followed by sneezing, watery eyes, and a scratchy throat. Night may bring a dry tickling cough. May be a fever during first 3 days. By the 4th or 5th days, the base of the nose may be red and raw: the nasal discharge may be yellow and thick; the cough may be present day and night, nose may be stuffy, child’s appetite may be poor and the child may be tired. Treatment for a cold is:

1. Offer extra fluids: don’t force solid foods if child doesn’t feel like them.
2. Plan extra rest periods.
3. Use a cool air humidifier near the child’s bed.
4. A nose syringe can be used to help clear nasal passages of the infant—use only at the base edge of the nose.
5. Use petroleum jelly to help relieve pain of raw noses, spreading it thin.
6. Normal saline drops can be used to relieve nasal congestion (1/4 teaspoon salt to 1 cup warm water). Use two drops in each nostril, followed by nose blowing or gentle suctioning with a nose syringe (bulb) 4 to 5 times a day. Important times to consider suctioning an infant’s nose would be prior to feeding and sleeping.
7. Avoid smoking around child. Antibiotics do not help colds.

Vomiting and Diarrhea:

Vomiting and diarrhea are common symptoms of many different illnesses. Most children with vomiting and/or diarrhea have simple viral infections that will last a few hours to a few days and get better without medication. Generally medications to stop vomiting or diarrhea are not recommended because they rarely work and often cause bad side effects. In treating vomiting and diarrhea, you need to know how to recognize the signs of a more serious illness, and how to prevent dehydration with clear liquids.

Preventing dehydration:

The goal of treatment of ordinary vomiting and diarrhea is to give the child enough fluids to prevent dehydration (drying out, loss of body fluids) while giving the stomach and intestines a chance to get better. Start by giving nothing by mouth for a short time 1-2 hours. Then offer clear liquids. Clear liquids are the mainstay of treatment. Suitable clear liquids include: Pedialyte, Gatorade, popsicles, diluted soft drinks, Jello water. Do not give milk, orange juice or red colored liquids.

For Vomiting:

Begin with very small amount, 1 tablespoon every 15 minutes for the first hour. If this is held down, increase the amount gradually and space it further apart. After 4-6 hours of tolerating fluids, start on very bland foods that are age appropriate (rice cereal, potatoes, plain toast, bananas). If your baby hasn’t started solid food yet, offer breast milk or half strength formula. Increase to regular strength formula after about 12 hours of tolerating half strength formula.

For Diarrhea:

Give large amounts of clear liquids every 3-4 hours. If the child has both vomiting and diarrhea, follow the vomiting instructions until the vomiting has stopped. A very bland diet as mentioned above is desirable for the first couple days.

Signs of Dehydration:

1. Thirst
2. Irritability
3. Dry mouth
4. No tears when cries
5. Dry skin, or skin doesn't bounce back when gently pinched
6. Dark urine or decreased urine output
7. Fast breathing

Call your healthcare provider if:

1. Less than 6 weeks of age
2. Fever over 104 F
3. Lethargy
4. Vomiting blood or blood in stools
5. Severe abdominal pain
6. Significant non-intestinal symptoms: earache, severe headache, deep cough, painful urination, etc.
7. Failure to improve with home treatment within 3 days.
8. No urination in 12 hours for infants, 16 hours for older children.
9. Constant vomiting after a recent influenza illness or chickenpox

Prevention is the best medicine!

1. Keep immunizations current.
2. Avoid people who are ill.
3. Frequent and thorough hand washing particularly before eating and after toileting
4. Take your child in for periodic health exams
5. Establish good nutrition, diet and exercise habits
6. Fresh air is important
7. Get plenty of rest