

Is Your Child too Sick for School?



Awareness CLINICAL SERVICES AND PATIENT CARE PROGRAMS

EARLY IN THE MORNING it is often difficult to make a decision about whether or not your child is sick enough to stay home from school. With minor symptoms you often cannot tell whether he is going to get better or worse during the course of the day.

The main reasons for keeping your child home are:

- if he's too sick to be comfortable at school
- if he might spread a contagious disease to other children

As a rule of thumb, a child should stay home if there is:

- a fever over 100.4° F
- vomiting more than once
- diarrhea
- a very frequent cough
- persistent pain (ear, stomach, etc.)
- a widespread rash

Most of these problems need to be discussed with your child's pediatrician to determine if an office visit is needed. (If your child has frequent complaints of pain that cause school absence, you should consider the possibility that your child is intentionally avoiding school. Bring this to the attention of the child's doctor before a great deal of school has been missed.)

On the other hand, children who don't have a fever and only have a mild cough, runny nose, or other cold symptoms can be sent to school without any harm to themselves or others. The following guidelines may help in your decision process:

- A **runny nose** is the way many children respond to pollen, dust or a cold virus. Minor cold or allergy symptoms should not be a reason to miss school. Many healthy children have as many as six colds per year, especially in the early school years.
- **Coughing**, especially if it is persistent during the day, can indicate a worsening of cold or allergy symptoms. It may be a sign of a secondary infection (sinusitis, pneumonia), which may require medical treatment. It may also indicate mild asthma. If your child's cough

is worse than you might expect with a common cold, you need to consult your child's doctor. You should do so immediately if the child is not acting normal, has a fever, or has any difficulty breathing.

- **Diarrhea and vomiting** make children very uncomfortable. A single episode of vomiting, without any other symptoms, may not be reason enough for the child to miss school, but be sure the school can reach you if symptoms occur again during the day. A single episode of watery diarrhea probably warrants not going to school. It could be very embarrassing and uncomfortable for your child to have another episode while in school. If diarrhea or vomiting are frequent or are accompanied by fever, rash or general weakness, consult your child's doctor and keep the child out of school until the illness passes.
- **Fever** (generally considered to be over 100.4° F) is an important symptom — especially when it occurs along with a sore throat, nausea or a rash. Your child could have a contagious illness, which could be passed to classmates and teachers. While you can treat the fever, and usually make the child feel better temporarily, the cause of the fever (and the risk of passing it to others) is still there. Children with fever should stay home until there is no fever for 24 hours.
- **Strep throat and scarlet fever** are two highly contagious conditions caused by the same bacterial infection. They usually arrive with a sudden complaint of sore throat and fever, and often stomachache and headache. With scarlet fever, a rash usually appears within 12 to 48 hours. A child with these symptoms should see his doctor for diagnosis and treatment, and should remain out of school until he is without fever and has been on antibiotics for 24 hours.

- **Pinkeye, or conjunctivitis**, can be caused by a virus, bacteria or allergy. The first two are very contagious. The eye will be reddened, and a cloudy or yellow discharge is usually present. The eye may be sensitive to light. Consult with your child's doctor to see if antibiotic eye drops are needed. Again, the child should stay home until symptoms subside and he has been on antibiotic eye drops at least 24 hours or until the doctor recommends the child return to school.
- **Middle ear infections** can cause great discomfort and often fever, but are not contagious to others. The child should see his doctor for diagnosis and treatment and should stay at home if he has fever or pain.
- **Flu** is a contagious virus that usually occurs in the winter months. Symptoms include body aches, high fever, chills, congestion, sore throat, and, in some children, vomiting. The child should stay home until these symptoms improve, usually five to seven days. Consult your child's doctor for treatment suggestions to make your child more comfortable.
- **Impetigo** is a staph or strep infection that creates a red, oozing blister-like area that can appear anywhere on the body or face. A honey-colored crust may appear on the area. It can be passed to others by direct contact. Consult your child's doctor for treatment and length of time the child should remain out of school, especially if the area cannot be covered.
- **Chickenpox** is a highly contagious viral illness. It causes fever and an itchy rash, which spreads quickly all over the body, changing from red bumps to blister-like lesions, then scabs. The child needs to stay home until all bumps are scabbed and no new bumps have appeared for two days. Your child is contagious at least two days before the rash starts, so you need to let the school and playmates know, and consult your child's doctor for symptomatic treatment. A vaccine is now available for children who have not yet had chickenpox and will be required for kindergarten beginning in fall 2000. In fall 2001, the vaccine will also be required

for all new sixth graders who have not yet had chickenpox.

- **Scabies and lice** brought into a school can quickly produce an epidemic of itching and scratching. Scabies are tiny insects that burrow into the skin and cause severe itching. Lice are tiny wingless insects, like ticks, that thrive on the warm scalps of children and also cause itching. Both should be treated immediately, with advice from your child's doctor. Children need to stay home from school until head lice are dead and until nits or eggs are removed with a special fine comb. Head checks should continue for 10 to 14 days. Caution your child against sharing combs, brushes, hats or other clothing. In the case of scabies children should stay home for 24 hours after treatment

All of these illnesses can be easily spread, both in school and in the family. Keep in mind that hand washing is the single most important thing you can do and teach your child to do to help prevent the spread of infections.

Whenever there is doubt in your mind about sending your child to school, consult your child's doctor before doing so. A phone consultation may be all that is necessary, or your child's doctor may need to see the child in the office. You may also call the Children's Healthcare of Atlanta 24-hour nurse advice line at 404.250.kids for advice when your child's doctor's office is not open.

Remember always to make sure that your child's school knows how to reach you during the day, and that there is a back-up plan and phone number on file if they cannot reach you.

This general healthcare information should not be used as a substitute or in place of contacting your child's healthcare provider. If you need further assistance, call 404.250.kids to speak to a pediatric nurse. For more information check out our Web site at www.choa.org and click on "medical library," "for professionals" or "for parents."