

Common Childhood Infections

Part II Other Common Infections



There was a time when childhood infections killed thousands of children. Today, vaccines protect against many of those infections, but you cannot immunize your child against every infectious disease. If you know the signs and symptoms of the most common childhood infections, you can at least help your sick child get better.

It is also important to know when to contact your pediatrician. Do so if you see signs of any of the following illnesses and are concerned (especially if your child is under 2 months of age). Use this brochure as a guide to common childhood infections.

Causes of infections

Most infections in children are caused by viruses, but they can also be caused by bacteria. Bacteria can live in certain parts of the body without causing any harm. They cause infections when they move to parts of the body where they do not belong. They can also come into the body from the outside; in the body they can cause an infection that requires treatment with an antibiotic.

Most viral diseases are not treated with an antibiotic because antibiotics do not work on viruses. Instead, the body gets rid of viruses on its own. When your child has a virus, your pediatrician will tell you how to make your child more comfortable. You should also make sure your child gets plenty of rest and eats a balanced diet.

Conjunctivitis (pinkeye)

Pinkeye is an infection that causes painful or itchy, red eyes. The undersides of your child's eyelids may also be irritated.

To treat pinkeye, your pediatrician may prescribe warm compresses and antibiotic drops or ointment. If the redness and swelling remain after a few days of treatment, it may mean a virus or allergy is causing the pinkeye.

Let your pediatrician know if your child has eye irritation with a high fever, sluggishness, or more severe swelling and redness around the eye. These could be signs of a more serious infection.

Not all pinkeye infections are contagious. Your pediatrician can let you know whether your child should stay out of school or the child care center until the infection clears.

Sty

A tender, local swelling and redness on your child's eyelid are usually signs of a sty. This is an infection in a gland of the eyelid. To treat a sty, apply warm compresses often. Let your pediatrician know if this does not work. He or she may then prescribe an antibiotic ointment or refer your child to an eye doctor who can drain the sty surgically. Sties are not very contagious.

Vomiting and diarrhea

Vomiting and diarrhea are the reasons many parents call the pediatrician. These illnesses are usually caused by viruses that infect the intestine. They usually last only about a day or two, but in some cases they can last up to a week.

If your child is throwing up, your pediatrician may tell you to not give food and fluid for a few hours. You can then give your child small sips of clear fluids, later followed by easy-to-digest foods. This will help prevent more vomiting, which can lead to dehydration.

Diarrhea is frequent, loose, watery stools. You may need to stop feeding your child solid foods and milk for 12 to 24 hours and instead give an oral electrolyte solution to prevent dehydration. You can buy this at your local drugstore.

Giardia is a parasite that infects the bowel and often causes prolonged diarrhea. It can be a problem, especially for those in child care centers and rural areas. If your child's diarrhea does not clear up, your pediatrician may test for *Giardia*. Disease caused by *Giardia* is treated with medication.

Mild vomiting and diarrhea rarely cause dehydration. However, if your child is dehydrated, she may:

- seem tired or have less energy
- produce less urine or tears
- have a dry mouth
- have sunken eyes

Some children may throw up many times over several days. If this occurs, and you notice any of the other symptoms listed previously, your pediatrician will want to examine your child. These symptoms may indicate dehydration or, less often, the first signs of a rare condition known as Reye syndrome. As Reye syndrome has been linked with taking aspirin during certain viral illnesses, you should never give aspirin to an infant or child.

If dehydration occurs, your child may need to have an intravenous (IV) tube inserted to receive fluids through her veins. To reduce the chance of dehydration, call your pediatrician early if your child has vomiting or diarrhea that will not go away.

Urinary tract infection (UTI)

Urinary tract infections (UTIs) are found in children from infancy through adolescence. A UTI occurs in the kidney or bladder and can cause the following symptoms:

- fever
- painful and frequent urination
- vomiting
- abdominal pain

Treatment of UTIs consists of taking an antibiotic for about 10 days. Even though your child shows signs of improvement within 1 to 2 days of starting to take an antibiotic, he must still finish the entire prescription.

X-rays and other tests are often needed to help determine the causes of the UTI.

Impetigo (skin infection)

Your child may have a skin infection called **impetigo** if a scratch turns into a yellow, oozing, crusty sore surrounded by redness. Impetigo can spread on the skin quickly. It can also spread to other people if they touch the infected skin lesions, by fingers, or from soiled clothing. This infection is most common in warm weather.

An antibiotic, taken by mouth or in ointment form, is used to treat impetigo.

If any of these illnesses or infections develop, remember that your pediatrician is your best source of help. Most important, if the illness or infection does not seem to go away, or appears to get worse, your pediatrician needs to know. Always call when you are concerned!

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

Signs of infection in an infant

These are the signs of infection in an infant under 2 months of age. Since infections can be especially dangerous in a child this young, call your pediatrician right away if your child develops any of these symptoms:

- poor feeding
- poor color
- listlessness
- weak cry
- rectal temperature of at least 100.4°F
- breathing problems
- unusual fussiness
- sleeping more than usual
- vomiting or diarrhea

