

# Is Your Child too Sick for School?

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 it is going to get better or worse during the course of the day.

The main reasons for keeping your child home are

- if they are too sick to be comfortable at school and
- if they might spread a contagious disease to other children.

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

- a fever over 100.0\* F,
- vomiting (especially more than twice),
- diarrhea,
- a very frequent cough,
- persistent pain (ear, stomach, etc.), or
- a widespread rash.

Most of these problems need to be discussed with your child's health care provider to determine if an office visit is needed. (If your child has frequent complaints of pain or illness that cause school absences, 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. Hand washing, blowing your nose with a tissue, covering your mouth when you cough, and general infection control are good practices in these situations. 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 with your child's health care provider. You should do so immediately if the child is not acting normal, has a fever, or has any difficulty breathing.

- **Diarrhea and vomiting** make a child 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 is frequent or is 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 100.0 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 that 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 to others are still there. Children with fever should stay home until there is no fever for 24 hours.
- **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 health care provider for treatment suggestions to make your child more comfortable.
- **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 that thrive on the warm scalps of children and also cause itching. Both should be treated immediately with advice from your child's health care provider. Children need to stay home from school until head lice are dead and until nits or eggs are removed with a special fine tooth 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.

- **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/she has been on antibiotic eye drops at least 24 hours or until the doctor recommends the child return to school.

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 you can teach your child to do to help prevent the spread of infections. Whenever there is a doubt in your mind about sending your child to school, consult your child's health care provider or call the school nurse.

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