

Is Your Child too Sick for School?

Early in the morning, it can be difficult to know 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:

- He is too sick to be comfortable at school.
- He might spread the sickness to other children.

Your child should stay home if he has:

- A fever higher than 100.4°F
- Vomited more than once
- Diarrhea
- Frequent cough
- Persistent pain (ear, stomach, etc.)
- A widespread rash

Most of these problems need to be discussed with your child's doctor to know if an office visit is needed. (If your child has frequent complaints of pain that cause school absence, you should consider that your child may be avoiding school. Talk with his doctor before too many days have been missed.)

On the other hand, children who do not 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.

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 be a sign that a cold or allergy symptom is getting worse. It may be a sign of a secondary infection (e.g., sinusitis, pneumonia), which may require medical treatment. It also may be a sign of mild asthma. If your child's cough is worse than you might expect with a common cold, you need to consult his doctor. Do so right away if your child is acting different than usual, has a fever or difficulty breathing.

Diarrhea and vomiting make children very uncomfortable.

A single episode of diarrhea is likely enough to keep your child at home. 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 him out of school until the illness passes.

Fever (generally considered to be higher than 100.4°F) is an important symptom—especially when it occurs along with a sore throat, nausea or rash. Your child may have an 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 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 sudden 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 and should stay home 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 red, and a cloudy or yellow discharge is usually present. The eye may be sensitive to light. Consult your child's doctor to see if antibiotic eye drops are needed. Again, your child should stay home until symptoms subside and he has been on antibiotic eye drops at least 24 hours or until the doctor recommends your child return to school.

Middle ear infections can cause great discomfort and often fever, but are not contagious to others. Your 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. Your 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 your 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. Your 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 his school and playmates know. Consult your child's doctor for treatment. A vaccine is available for children who have not yet had chickenpox and is required for kindergarten. The vaccine also is required for all 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 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 spread easily, both in school and in the family. Keep in mind that handwashing is the most important thing you and your child can 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 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.

Make sure 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 the school cannot reach you.

This is general information and is not specific medical advice. Always consult with a doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns about the health of a child.

As a not-for-profit organization, Children's Healthcare of Atlanta produces materials in-house using the most cost-efficient paper and printing techniques.