

What Every Parent Should Know About the Flu

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By: Barbara Brody

There's no way around it: Little kids get sick. A lot. For the most part that's normal and nothing to worry about. You can even take some solace in the fact that your child's frequent sick days are helping them build immunity. The flu, however, is a bit different.

The flu (influenza) tends to be far more severe than other common infections like colds. Babies and young children are especially vulnerable to catching the flu, and they're more apt to develop serious complications like pneumonia that could land them in the hospital. On the plus side, there's a lot you can do to protect your kids from the flu and keep them as safe as possible if they should contract it. Here's how.

Get your child vaccinated ASAP.

Flu season tends to peak between December and February, but the virus often starts circulating in the fall. You should also keep in mind that it takes about two weeks to develop antibodies after getting vaccinated, says Maya Heinert, MD, a pediatric emergency medicine physician and spokesperson for RxSaver by RetailMeNot. Her advice: Get vaccinated as early in the fall as possible.

Another reason to start early is that some young children require two doses. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend that kids age 8 or younger who haven't been vaccinated against the flu before get two doses administered at least one month apart, so it pays to plan ahead.

Kids who've been vaccinated before just need one dose every year (same as adults); you have to get vaccinated annually because the virus mutates and the strains that are most prevalent vary from year to year. Babies younger than 6 months aren't eligible, but if you got the shot while you were pregnant some protection should have transferred to your little one.

Kids older than 2 can get a flu shot or, if you prefer, the nasal spray vaccine. The CDC and American Academy of Pediatrics say that both of these are good options, but keep in mind that the shot contains completely dead viruses while the nasal spray contains weakened ones. Neither will give your child the flu, but respiratory side effects (like a runny nose) are more common with the spray.

Discourage kids from sharing germs.

Whether they're rubbing their drippy noses on their sleeves or putting toys in their mouths, young children aren't exactly known for practicing good hygiene. If your kids are very young, help them wash their hands as often as possible, clean toys after play dates, and be sure that your child's school or daycare is regularly sanitizing toys, desks, and other commonly-touched items.

As your kids get a little older, make a point of teaching them to cover their coughs and sneezes (with their elbow, if a tissue isn't available) and to wash their hands often. "I trained my kids to wash their hands with soap and warm water as soon as they come home from school," says Dr. Heinert. Remember: A quick rinse won't cut it. Make sure everyone lathers up and rubs thoroughly for at least 20 seconds (about the amount of time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday" twice).

If your child does get the flu, TLC is often the best remedy.

The flu tends to come on abruptly with a fever, cough, and muscle aches. Some kids also experience vomiting or diarrhea. While it's hard to see your child so ill, most children who get the flu don't need any special medical treatment. In fact, unless your child is at high risk for complications or is experiencing serious symptoms like a high fever that sticks around for days, you're probably better off *not* dragging a sick kid to the doctor's office, says Dr. Heinert.

Assuming your child doesn't have any risk factors like asthma or a compromised immune system, simply keep them comfortable: think plenty of rest, fluids, and over-the-counter pain/fever relievers as needed. If your child is at higher risk, or if you have an infant at home (even if the baby isn't the child who's sick), then a visit to the pediatrician and a flu test may be in order. In these sort of instances, your provider might prescribe an antiviral medication like Tamiflu which should shorten the duration and severity of the illness.

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When in doubt, call your pediatrician.

Most of the time the flu is uncomfortable but not life-threatening, though there are exceptions. If your child is having trouble breathing, appears listless, or their lips or face appear blue, get help immediately.

Because infants (3 months and younger) are so vulnerable, they need to see a doctor or go to the emergency room if they have any fever for any reason, even if it's not very high.

No matter your child's age or overall health status, you should call the pediatrician if they have a high fever that keeps rising or lasts more than two days, seem to be getting progressively sicker, or anytime you're unsure about what to do or whether they might require the help of a medical professional.

Barbara Brody is a freelance writer and editor who specializes in health and wellness. A regular contributor to the RxSaver by RetailMeNot blog, she has also written for WebMD, Prevention, Shape, Health and many other print and digital outlets.

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