

Is Your Child too Sick for School?



Awareness

CHILD HEALTH AND WELLNESS

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.

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 visit our Web site at www.choa.org and click on "your child's health."