



MayoClinic.com reprints

This single copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. For permission to reprint multiple copies or to order presentation-ready copies for distribution, use the reprints link below.

· [Order reprints of this article now.](#)

Original Article:

Children's illness: Top 5 causes of missed school

Does it seem as if your child is sick all the time? In school or child care, your child's immune system is put to the test. After all, young children in large groups are breeding grounds for the organisms that cause illness. Here's a lineup of the infectious illnesses most likely to keep children home from school or child care, including how to treat and prevent these illnesses — and when it's OK to return to usual activities.

The top five culprits

1. Common cold

The common cold spreads easily through contact with infected respiratory droplets coughed or sneezed into the air. Signs and symptoms may include runny or stuffy nose, itchy or sore throat, cough, sneezing and low-grade fever.

There's no cure for the common cold, and cough and cold medicines aren't recommended for young children — but you can help your child feel better while he or she toughs it out.

- Offer plenty of fluids, such as water, juice and chicken soup.
- Encourage your child to rest as much as possible.
- Run a humidifier in your child's bedroom, or have your child sit in a steamy bathroom.
- Try over-the-counter saline nose drops.
- For an older child, soothe a sore throat with hard candy, cough drops or gargled salt water.

An over-the-counter pain reliever — such as acetaminophen (Tylenol,

others) or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, others) — can reduce a fever and ease the pain of a sore throat or headache. Remember, however, low-grade fevers don't need treatment. If you give your child a pain reliever, follow the dosing guidelines carefully. Don't give aspirin to anyone age 18 or younger.

2. Stomach flu (viral gastroenteritis)

Viral gastroenteritis typically develops after contact with an infected person or after eating or drinking contaminated food or water. Signs include vomiting and diarrhea.

There's no effective treatment for viral gastroenteritis. While the illness runs its course:

- Prevent dehydration with an oral rehydration solution such as Pedialyte, which can help replace lost fluids, minerals and salts.
- Encourage your child to rest as much as possible.
- Slowly return to a normal diet, starting with easy-to-digest items — toast, rice, bananas, potatoes. Avoid dairy products, which can make diarrhea worse.

Don't give your child over-the-counter anti-diarrheal medications unless your child's doctor recommends it. These medications can make it harder for your child's body to eliminate the virus. If your child seems dehydrated — is excessively thirsty, complains of dry mouth, produces little or no urine, or seems severely weak or lethargic — contact the doctor right away.

3. Ear infection (otitis media)

Ear infections usually start with a viral infection, such as a cold. The middle ear becomes inflamed from the infection, and fluid builds up behind the eardrum. This fluid can become a breeding ground for viruses or bacteria. Your child may complain of ear pain, tug or pull at the affected ear, be unusually irritable or have trouble sleeping.

Most ear infections clear on their own in just a few days, and antibiotics won't help an infection caused by a virus. If your child is uncomfortable:

- Place a warm, moist cloth over the affected ear.
- Ask your child's doctor about pain relievers. He or she may recommend eardrops or an over-the-counter pain reliever, such as acetaminophen (Tylenol, others) or ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, others). Use the correct dose for your child's age and weight. Don't give aspirin to anyone age 18 or younger.

4. Pink eye (conjunctivitis)

Pink eye (conjunctivitis) is an inflammation or infection of the clear membrane that lines the eyelid and part of the eyeball. Pink eye is typically caused by a virus, often in association with a cold — although sometimes bacteria or allergies are to blame. When pink eye is caused by a virus or bacteria, it's highly contagious. You may notice redness and discharge in one or both of your child's eyes. Your child may complain of itchy eyes or blurred vision.

If your child has bacterial pink eye, the doctor may prescribe antibiotic eyedrops or ointment. Viral pink eye simply needs to run its course. Use warm or cool compresses on the eyes to ease your child's discomfort.

5. Sore throat

Most sore throats are caused by viruses. They're usually associated with other respiratory signs, such as a runny nose and cough. Most sore throats go away without treatment. To help your child feel better in the meantime:

- Offer plenty of fluids. Try honey and lemon in hot water.
- Encourage your child to rest his or her voice as much as possible.
- Run a humidifier in your child's bedroom, or have your child sit in a steamy bathroom.
- For an older child, try gargled salt water, hard candy or cough drops.

If the sore throat lasts longer than a week, causes severe pain, or is accompanied by a fever or red and swollen tonsils, contact your child's doctor. Your child may have strep throat, a bacterial infection that's treated with antibiotics.

When to stay home, when to return to school or child care

Although the specific school or facility guidelines may vary, your child will probably need to stay home if he or she:

- Has a fever higher than 100.4 F (38 C)
- Is vomiting
- Has diarrhea
- Is in the first 24 hours of antibiotic treatment for pink eye or strep throat

Generally, a child can return to school or child care when he or she:

- Has no fever
- Can eat and drink normally
- Is rested and alert enough to pay attention in class
- Has completed any period of doctor-recommended isolation

Prevention for one and all

Common sense can go a long way toward preventing illness. Teach your child the basics:

- **Keep your hands clean.** Remind your child to wash his or her hands before eating and after using the toilet or blowing his or her nose. Suggest soaping up for as long as it takes to sing the ABCs, "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" or the "Happy Birthday" song.
- **Cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze.** It's best to use a tissue. If you can't reach a tissue in time, cough or sneeze into the crook of your elbow.
- **Keep your hands away from your eyes and out of your mouth.** Hands are often covered in germs.
- **Avoid anyone who's sick.** Close contact with someone who's sick could leave you sick, too.

As your child gets older, he or she will build an arsenal of antibodies to fight common viruses. Gradually your child will become less prone to common illnesses and recover more quickly from the illnesses he or she does catch.

[By Mayo Clinic Staff](#)

Aug. 1, 2008

© 1998-2008 Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research (MFMER). All rights reserved. A single copy of these materials may be reprinted for noncommercial personal use only. "Mayo," "Mayo Clinic," "MayoClinic.com," "EmbodyHealth," "Reliable tools for healthier lives," "Enhance your life," and the triple-shield Mayo Clinic logo are trademarks of Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research.

CC00059