

Viral illness in children

What is a viral illness?

A virus is a germ that causes infections such as the common cold, bronchiolitis, tonsillitis, ear infections and influenza. There are hundreds of different viruses.

What causes a viral illness?

A virus can be spread from person to person in tiny droplets from the nose (sneezing or runny nose) and mouth (saliva or cough), vomit or faeces (especially if someone has diarrhoea).

A virus can easily spread when children have close contact with each other, such as in childcare centres, kindergarten or school. There is usually a delay between when a child is exposed to the virus and when they develop an illness. This generally happens within a few days but for some viruses may be up to two to three weeks later.

It is common for children to have between six and 10 viral illnesses a year in the first few years of life. It is also common for children to get sick from one virus shortly after getting better from a different one, seeming to parents like they are sick all the time. As children get older, the frequency of viral illnesses usually reduces.

What are the symptoms?

There are a variety of symptoms including:

- blocked or runny nose
- red watery eyes
- sore throat
- fever and blanching rash (the spots turn white for a second after you push on them with a finger or a glass)
- coughing and sneezing
- vomiting and diarrhoea
- wanting to sleep more (lethargy)
- not wanting to eat
- feeling generally unwell.

While most viruses are mild in children, infants (especially under three months of age) may become very ill very quickly and need to be assessed by a doctor.

Treatment

Viruses cannot be treated with antibiotics. The best treatment is rest at home, where your child's immune system will be able to fight the virus.

Home care

A number of simple measures can make your child more comfortable.

- Give your child small amounts of drink frequently when awake (such as a mouthful of water every 15 minutes or so). This helps to ease a sore throat by keeping it moist and replaces the fluid lost with a fever. Water is best, but you can also offer your child diluted juice or cordial. Icy-poles may be given to soothe a sore throat and are a good way of providing fluids to your child (especially if they are vomiting or have diarrhoea). They will not make the virus worse or your child's throat feel worse.
- Giving enough fluid is particularly important in young infants – this should be milk or rehydration fluids such as Gastrolyte.
- Do not be concerned if your child does not eat. When they feel better they will eat again.
- Allow your child to rest.
- Use saline nasal (nose) drops to clear a blocked nose in babies with a blocked nose (which can make it easier for them to feed).
- Use paracetamol (such as Panadol) or ibuprofen (such as Nurofen) for pain, or if your child is miserable, irritable or lethargic. Do not use paracetamol or ibuprofen to reduce fever. Fever actually helps the body

get better naturally, and reducing the fever may prolong the illness. Carefully check the label for the correct dose and make sure you are not giving your child any other products containing paracetamol or ibuprofen (such as some cough medicines and cold and flu preparations).

- Do not use other remedies unless advised by a doctor or health care professional.
- Do not give a child aspirin.

What to expect

Your child is likely to feel better in a few days, but may be unwell for up to two weeks.

A cough can linger for several weeks.

Most rashes are mild and do not cause your child any distress, although some rashes may cause a lot of itching. A rash often lasts a few days before fading away. Sometimes a rash appears when a fever goes away. When this rash appears it means the child is getting better.

Sometimes colds can trigger asthma (if your child has a diagnosis of asthma) or a wheeze (whistling sound when breathing). If this happens, treat the asthma as you normally would. If the wheeze is new and your child is having difficulty breathing get them checked by a doctor.

Rarely, a child can get a bacterial infection on top of the viral illness. If your child is not improving or getting worse, take them to see your local doctor.

Prevention

It is just about impossible to prevent your child from catching a virus. However you can help to protect them by:

- having your child immunised to prevent certain viruses such as measles, mumps, rubella and chicken pox
- ensuring your child has a balanced diet and plenty of sleep – this will help keep their immune system in good shape (children should not take vitamins on a daily basis)
- keeping your child home from childcare or school while they are unwell
- teaching older children to wash their hands every time they touch a tissue, sneeze or cough into their hand (tissues are more hygienic than hankies). Teach your child to throw tissues into the bin as soon as they have used them.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 111). Do this if your child:

- is very pale or is hard to wake
- has trouble breathing
- is three months old, or younger, and is not feeding or has a fever.
- See your local doctor or health care professional if your child has:
 - headaches or a stiff neck
 - pain that does not respond to paracetamol or ibuprofen
 - persistent vomiting and diarrhoea
 - a high fever (that is not improving after 48 hours)
 - refused to drink or have an icy-pole for six hours. Do not be concerned if your child does not want to eat
 - a rash or spot that does not turn white (blanch) for a second or so when you push on it with your fingers or place a glass on it
- dry nappies or less than four wet nappies a day
- not improved after 48 hours
- given you concerns for any other reason.
- If your baby seems sick and is under three months old, they will need to be assessed by a doctor. Babies can become unwell very quickly.