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Viral illness

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Patient information

Viral illness



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What are viral illnesses?

A viral illness is an infection caused by a germ called a virus. Viruses cause lots of illnesses, such as the common cold, bronchiolitis, tonsillitis, ear infections, gastroenteritis, flu (influenza), and chickenpox. There are hundreds of different viruses; knowing which one your child has is usually not important.

When your child is young, it may seem like they are always sick – getting one virus shortly after getting better from another. It is common for healthy children to get up to 12 viral infections a year in their first few years of life. As your child gets older and their immune system strengthens, they should get sick less often.

Signs and symptoms of common viral illnesses

Your child's viral infection symptoms will depend on the virus. The most common symptoms of viral illnesses are:

- Fever (temperature of 38° or more),
- Tiredness and wanting to sleep more (lethargy),
- Not wanting to eat,
- Feeling generally unwell.

Many viruses also cause:

- A blocked or runny nose,
- Red, watery eyes,
- A sore throat,
- Rashes that turn white (blanch) for a second or so after you push on them with a finger,
- Coughing and / or sneezing,
- Vomiting and / or diarrhoea,
- Abdominal pain,
- Aches and pains.

Are viral illnesses contagious?

Almost all viral illnesses are contagious. That is why they spread quickly through childcare facilities and schools. The two most common ways for viruses to spread are:

1. Through tiny droplets in the air or on surfaces, such as from coughing and sneezing,
2. When someone touches the saliva, mucus, vomit or poo of an infected person.

Stopping the spread of viruses

Keeping your child at home when sick reduces the spread of viruses. Within the home, good hygiene will help to stop the spread to other household members. This includes:

- Regularly cleaning hands with soap or alcohol hand sanitiser,
- Not sharing cups or cutlery,
- Encouraging your child to cough or sneeze into a tissue or their elbow,
- Teaching your child to throw tissues into the bin after use and to wash their hands afterwards.

If possible while sick, keep your child away from young babies and elderly people.

Caring for your child's symptoms at home

Antibiotics cannot treat viruses. The best treatment for viral illnesses is plenty of rest at home; this will help your child's immune system to fight the virus.

You can help your child to be more comfortable by:

- Give your child small amounts to drink often when they are awake. A mouthful of fluid every 15 minutes or so is a good guide.
- The type of fluid depends on your child's age. Babies should have breastmilk or formula, or rehydration fluids. Older children should have water, juice or milk. If they are just having water, then make sure they eat some basic foods.
- Use nasal saline spray to help clear a blocked nose – especially in babies; a clear nose will make feeding easier.
- Encourage your child to get plenty of rest.
- Give your child paracetamol or ibuprofen to help with pain or if they seem miserable, irritable or lethargic.
- If your child has a fever but does not seem miserable or uncomfortable, do not give them any medication. Fever helps the body to get better naturally.

It is normal for children to lose their appetite while sick. Do not be worried if your child stops eating for a few days; they will start eating when they feel better.

When to seek further help?

Call 999 or return to CED if your child shows any of the red flag symptoms:

- Your child is struggling to breathe,
- Their skin looks blueish or grey,
- They are not waking or interacting,
- Your child has a rash that does not disappear when pressure is applied,
- They are lethargic all the time, with no bursts of energy,
- Your child has a rash and gets a headache, stiff neck or back pain,
- Your child is three months of younger and is not feeding well.

If you have concerns that your child is not showing signs of improvement, then please:

- Contact your own GP for reassessment
- Call 111 out of normal working hours for advice
- Return to CED

How to contact us

Children's Emergency Department

[Watford General Hospital](#)

Vicarage Road

Watford

Hertfordshire WD18 0HB

Tel: 01923 217564

Hospital switchboard: 01923 244366

PALS

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Language



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