

# Children & the Flu: A Guide for Parents

by Brenda Foley, MD

Over the past few weeks, New England has seen an increase in flu cases, causing concern and worry in many parents. While the flu can sometimes turn serious, the good news is that most children usually overcome the illness without any complications. To best manage your child's illness, follow these helpful tips:

**Recognize the symptoms:** Influenza, also known as "the flu," is a viral illness of the respiratory tract caused by the influenza virus. Symptoms can be mild or severe and include fever, headache, sore throat, tiredness/fatigue, muscle aches, runny nose/congestion, and cough. Younger children, especially infants and toddlers, may also have vomiting and diarrhea. Typical symptoms last 5 to 7 days with the cough lasting up to 2 weeks!

**Is it the flu or a cold?** The common cold is a bit like the flu but shorter in duration and usually much less severe. A child with a cold may have a mild fever, but little fatigue or headache, and no muscle aches.

**Treatment at home:** Should your child get the flu, make sure he/she gets plenty of rest and drinks lots of fluids. You can give your child acetaminophen or ibuprofen (not on an empty stomach!) for the fever or pain to make them comfortable, but these medications will not resolve the symptoms. *Aspirin should not be given.* Over-the-counter cough and cold medications or flu medications should not

be used as they often have side effects and are not helpful. In some cases, your doctor

may prescribe a medication called Tamiflu, which is given to prevent the flu or lessen the severity and shorten the course/infectiousness of the virus. It must be started within 24 to 48 hours of the onset of the illness. Your doctor would need to examine your child first to determine if Tamiflu is appropriate.

**When to contact your doctor:** Most of us, including our children, will get better on our own and not need anything more than fluids, rest, and other comfort measures. However, if your child seems very sick you should consult with your pediatrician. Contact your pediatrician right away if your child:

- Has a fever that lasts longer than 4 to 5 days
- Has a fever higher than 104°F
- Has a rash with the fever
- Has difficulty breathing or fast/hard breathing
- Is not intermittently interactive with you or is so fussy that he/she does not want to be held
- Is not urinating very much or is drinking much less than usual
- Is acting unusual/confused, has a severe headache or persistent vomiting
- Seems better and then gets sick again
- Has a chronic medical condition that seems to be getting worse
- Is under 3 months of age

Complications of the flu include: bacterial pneumonia, dehydration, ear or sinus infections, worsening of chronic medical condition, and, in rare cases, encephalitis or death. These complications are more common in young children and those with chronic medical conditions such as diabetes, asthma, congenital heart disease, or muscle weakness problems.

**How to prevent the flu:** The best defense against the flu is to get a flu shot each year. It is recommended that all children 6 months through 5 years old receive a flu shot. Those in close contact with children, caregivers and children of any age with chronic health issues should also be immunized. It is also important to wash hands frequently, stay away from sick people or crowded places, and keep hands away from the face to prevent the spread of the virus.

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