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Common Childhood Illnesses and Communicable Diseases

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As children return to or enter school for the first time, parents should remember that they sometimes bring home more than just school books. Parasites, viruses, and other communicable diseases pass easily from child to child in schools and on playgrounds and end up in your home. Teach children to protect themselves and avoid spreading illnesses to others by following these simple rules:



- Wash your hands before eating and after toileting.
- Keep your hands out of your mouth and nose.
- Do not exchange clothing items, combs, or hairbrushes with others.
- Do not share eating and drinking utensils with others.

Some children with disabilities may not tell you or know exactly how to express how they are feeling or what it is that is bothering them. A parent's watchful eye is necessary. Any out-of-the-ordinary behavior could be a red flag. Monitor your child's health closely.

The following illnesses are very common communicable diseases exposed to children in schools. Consult your physician or pharmacist for more information regarding incubation times for these different illnesses and before administering over-the-counter medications, especially those that may contain aspirin.

Chicken Pox – This virus causes itchy blisters and fever. Calamine lotion and oatmeal baths can help with the itching. Consult your physician or pharmacist about medications to administer for fever. If fever lasts longer than four days, or if the blisters seem to be infected, take the child to his/her doctor.



Common Cold – There are more than 20 different viruses that cause sneezing, coughing, and a runny nose. Give your child plenty of fluids and rest. Your pharmacist can recommend over-the-counter medicines to relieve some of the symptoms.



Pink Eye (Conjunctivitis)

– Pink eye can be bacterial or viral and causes the eye(s) to become red and itchy. Sometimes there is a thick, yellowish discharge, tearing, and even blurred vision. Pink eye is highly contagious. Take your child to his/her doctor for prescribed eye drops and keep him/her at home for treatment. Wash hands thoroughly before and after administering the eye drops.



Fifth Disease – This infection causes a mild rash or redness on the arms and legs and may cause fever or a cold right before the rash begins. Usually the child can recover on his/her own because it is a mild infection. Consult your doctor to verify that the rash is indeed Fifth Disease.



Influenza (Flu) – This virus causes fever, body aches, stomach symptoms (especially in children) and tiredness. The child should get plenty of rest and fluids. Consult your physician or pharmacist about non-aspirin medications for the fever and body aches. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommends a yearly flu vaccine for all children 6 months of age and older (as soon as the vaccine becomes available).



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Hand, Mouth and Foot Disease

– This virus causes fever, sores in the mouth, and a rash of blisters on palms of the hands and/or soles of the feet. Consult your physician or pharmacist about giving the child nonaspirin medications for the aches and fever. Keep your child home from school and others because contact with the blisters will spread the infection quickly.



Head Lice – These tiny parasites attach to the scalp and hair shafts and cause itching. Eggs hatch within a week and mature within seven days. Over the counter or prescription treatments are available to kill and remove lice. You also must treat your house by vacuuming several times (seal and throw away the vacuum's contents) and washing all clothing and bedding in very hot water. Place all stuffed animals and comforters in tightly-sealed plastic bags for a minimum of two weeks. Shampooing alone will not get rid of lice.



Hepatitis A – This highly contagious virus causes a child to be tired, lose his/her appetite, have a fever, diarrhea, and nausea. There is no treatment except proper nutrition. Take your child to the doctor if you suspect Hepatitis A. The doctor will know what to prescribe. There is a vaccine to help prevent this virus.



Measles – This highly contagious virus can be as simple as a rash accompanied by a low fever, but it can evolve into a high fever with a respiratory infection and become very serious quickly. Take your child to the doctor if you suspect measles. Keep the child away from anyone not immunized against measles. There is a vaccine to prevent measles.



Meningitis – This can be a bacterial or viral infection that affects the spinal cord and fluid surrounding the brain. Symptoms include high fever, stiff neck, and headache. Seek medical attention immediately if you suspect meningitis. Do not try to determine which type your child has. Doctors can treat viral meningitis fairly easily, but if a doctor suspects bacterial meningitis, he/she usually performs a spinal tap to determine an immediate course of treatment.



Mumps – This virus causes fever, body aches, muscle aches, loss of appetite, and swelling of the salivary glands. If you suspect mumps, take your child to his/her doctor because it is no longer a common virus. There is a vaccine to prevent mumps.



Whooping Cough (Pertussis)

– This highly contagious disease causes coughing attacks so severe, they will induce vomiting. See your doctor if the child has been exposed to someone with whooping cough. Antibiotics can shorten the illness.



Ringworm – This fungus causes a ring-shaped rash on the skin and/or scalp that is usually dry and scaly. Over-the-counter lotions and sprays are available to treat ringworm, but after two weeks if they become redder or swollen, take the child to a doctor.



Rotavirus – This virus causes vomiting, severe diarrhea, and fever and last a few days. The child needs plenty of rest and fluids to avoid dehydration. Consult your physician.



Scabies – These small parasites infest the skin, causing pimple-like irritation and intense itching. Take your child to his/her doctor for special lotions. Wash (in very hot water) all bedding and clothing worn up to two days before treatment actually began.



Resources:

- McCloud, Linda M. (2006). The Most Common Communicable Diseases Children May Acquire & How to Deal with Them. Retrieved online July, 2013 from <http://voices.yahoo.com/the-most-common-communicable-diseases-children-may-83372.html>.
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- Children's Health. 9 Childhood Illnesses: Get the Facts. (2013). Retrieved July 2013 from <http://children.webmd.com/features/childhood-illnesses-get-the-facts?page=3>

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