

When Sickness Strikes: Know When to Keep a Child Home From School

Frequently Asked Questions and Answers About Cold and Flu

School nurses frequently get asked questions from parents about when to keep their children home from school. With cold and flu season around the corner, school nurses may be assisted in their communication with parents by reviewing these questions and answers.

Question: When should I keep my child home from school with cold or flu symptoms?

Answer: If your child is exhibiting flu symptoms, keep him or her home from school. If your child has a cold, the decision to keep him or her home may depend on the severity of symptoms. Keep your child home if he or she has a fever of 100° or higher. If your child returns to school with a lingering cough or nasal congestion, send him or her with tissues and advise him or her to drink extra fluids.

Know the difference between a cold and the flu.

- **Flu is a serious illness, and children who have the flu should always stay home from school.**

Flu symptoms include fever, chills, cough, sore throat, headache, or muscle aches. With the flu, symptoms come on very quickly. It is a good idea to contact the child's doctor if he or she has these symptoms.

- Symptoms of a common cold include stuffy nose, sneezing, sore throat, and hacking cough. Often, cold symptoms come on gradually. Although the common cold is usually not serious, if symptoms are severe, it is a good idea to keep your child home to rest and get better, rather than spread the cold to other children at school.

Question: If my child does have the flu or a bad cold, how long should I keep him or her home from school?

Answer: Parents should keep their sick children home from school until they have been without fever (temperature under 100°) for 24 hours, to prevent spreading illness to others.

- Flu is spread from person to person through coughing and sneezing. Occasionally, people can get the flu from touching a germ-infested surface.
- Research shows that people with the flu may be able to infect others 1 day before symptoms occur and up

to 5 days after getting sick. This means it is possible to spread the flu to someone before you know you are sick.

Question: Should I call my doctor?

Answer: If a child experiences flu symptoms, parents should contact his or her pediatrician early.

- Some children may benefit from an antiviral medication, which can be prescribed by a physician and can help lessen the symptoms and can reduce the risk of complications, allowing children to return to school sooner than expected.
- To be effective, antiviral medications must be taken within 48 hours after flu symptoms begin.

Question: What should I do to help prevent the rest of the household from getting sick?

Answer:

- **Teach and Practice Healthy Habits**
 - Wash your hands often with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds.
 - You can help prevent the flu from spreading at home by disinfecting frequently-touched surfaces, toys, and other commonly shared items.
- **Mind Your Manners**—Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing and sneezing, and throw away used tissues. Teach children to cough in their sleeve.
- **What's Mine Is Mine, What's Yours Is Yours**—Make sure that the family does not share drinks, water bottles, or used eating utensils.
- **Consider Seeing Your Doctor**—If someone in your household has the flu, a prescription of an antiviral medication to other household members can actually prevent them from getting the flu. Studies show that some antiviral medications are up to 92% effective in preventing the flu when taken once daily for 7 days. Antiviral medications are especially important for those children and older adults who have chronic health conditions.

The article is supported by an educational grant from Roche.