

June 2010

Caring for a Child with Influenza (the Flu)

What are the symptoms of the flu?

Flu symptoms usually appear suddenly and can include cough and a fever, sore throat, muscle aches, joint pain and fatigue.

Young children may not always have a fever and may feel sick to their stomach, vomit or have diarrhea.

Not everyone who gets the flu develops symptoms but they still may be able to spread it to others, especially if they cough or sneeze. It's important to help children to practice good cough and sneeze etiquette.

What basic precautions should children with the flu take?

If a child has flu symptoms they should:

- Stay home from school or child care until they are feeling better.
- Be helped with cough and sneeze etiquette, including learning to cover a cough or sneeze by coughing or sneezing into their elbow or sleeve or using a tissue to cover their nose and mouth. The tissue should be placed in the garbage immediately.
- Be helped to wash their hands often with soap and water, especially after coughing or sneezing.

Do household members or caregivers of children with the flu need to take any precautions?

Yes. If you are a household member or caregiver of a child with the flu you should:

- Wash your hands after being in contact with the ill child.
- Wash your hands and a child's hands after wiping their nose.
- Wash your hands after coughing, sneezing or wiping your nose.
- Wash your hands after touching objects handled by a child who has the flu.
- Clean surfaces (such as toys, bathroom taps and doorknobs) with household cleaners, especially after the ill child has touched them.
- Take care of yourself and your family by maintaining a healthy balanced diet, being active, avoiding cigarette smoke and other harmful substances and getting enough rest and sleep.

Getting a flu shot can also help to reduce your risk of catching the flu. Talk to your health care provider or call Health Links-Info Santé at 788-8200 or 1-888-315-9257 to find out more.

How do I know if a child has a fever?

Fever is a sign that the body is fighting an infection or other illness. A child has a fever if body temperature is 38°C (100.4°F) or higher.

Touching a forehead or neck is not a reliable way to check if someone has a fever. The best way to measure a young child's temperature is by using a digital thermometer.

For infants and young children, the safest way to take a temperature is in the centre of the armpit (axillary). If the child is over two years of age, an ear (tympanic) thermometer can be used.

Taking the temperature in the mouth is unsafe because young children can bite and break the thermometer. Also, the reading can be wrong because it is hard to keep a thermometer under a child's tongue.

Do not take the temperature in the rectum (bum). This can be dangerous and upsetting to the child.

For more information on taking a child's temperature, please see the fact sheet *Caring for a Child with a Fever* available at: <http://www.gov.mb.ca/health/documents/childhealth.html>

What can I do at home to treat a child's fever?

- Dress the child in lightweight clothing and keep the room temperature around 20°C (68°F). Do not take off your child's clothes because they may become too cold and start to shiver. Shivering produces more body heat, causing the temperature to rise again.
- Remove extra blankets so heat can leave your child's body. This helps lower body temperature. Cover only with a sheet.
- Offer plenty of fluids to drink such as water, watered-down apple juice, "flat" soft drinks or popsicles. If your child is breastfeeding, offer more frequent breastfeeding opportunities.
- Offer small, nutritious meals. Many children with a fever will not feel hungry.
- Acetaminophen (ex: Tylenol®, Tempra®) is the best drug for lowering fever in children. The dose and form of medication (drops, chewable tablets etc.) depends on your child's weight and age. Read product labels carefully for ingredients, dosage and frequency or consult with your doctor or pharmacist. Ibuprofen (ex: Advil®, Motrin®) may also be used for children older than six months.
- **Do not give acetylsalicylic acid, also known as ASA, (ex: Aspirin®) to anyone under 18 years of age because it can lead to brain and liver damage (Reye's Syndrome).**

How can I treat other flu symptoms?

- Make sure your child gets plenty of rest.
- Use a cool mist humidifier to help with a stuffy nose.
- If a baby is having problems breathing because of a stuffy nose, try using saline drops or spray to help thin the mucus. This will help to clear the nose by causing the child to sneeze. Using a rubber suction bulb may also help to clear the nose; however, suction bulbs should be used no more than three times a day.

When should I seek medical care for a child?

Many children with the flu have a fever. The degrees (or height) of a fever do not tell you how serious your child's illness is. How a child acts is usually a better sign. A child with a mild infection can have a high fever, while a child with a severe infection might have no fever at all. However, if your child is under five and has flu symptoms you should contact their health care provider.

It is especially important that you contact a health care provider or take your child to an emergency department if your child has signs of the flu and:

- has lung or heart disease;
- has an illness or is taking treatment that affects the immune system;
- takes acetylsalicylic acid (ASA or Aspirin®) regularly for a medical condition or has a chronic illness requiring regular medical care;
- has a fever for more than 72 hours;
- is excessively cranky, fussy or irritable;
- is not interested in playing with toys or is unusually sleepy, listless or does not respond;
- has trouble breathing when resting, is wheezing, has chest pain when breathing or is coughing a lot or coughing up bloody sputum (phlegm or saliva);
- has vomited for more than four hours or has severe diarrhea;
- has a fever and a rash or any other signs of illness that worry you, or
- is still not feeling better after five days or was feeling better and suddenly develops a new fever.

Take your child immediately to a hospital emergency department or call 911 if your child:

- has a fever and is under three months of age;
- drinks very little fluid and has not peed at least once every six hours when awake;
- has severe trouble breathing or blue lips;
- is limp or unable to move;
- is hard to wake up or does not respond;
- has a stiff neck;
- seems confused; or
- has a seizure (convulsion/fit)

Is there anything else I can do?

Yes. Preparing a home flu kit can help to ensure that you are ready to care for your child if they become ill. Make sure you have the following items in your home:

- digital thermometer
- acetaminophen (eg. Tylenol® or Tempra®) or ibuprofen (eg. Advil®) – *do not give ASA (eg. Aspirin®) to children and teens*
- facial tissues
- soap and water

Plan for someone to look after you or your children if you are ill and offer to provide others with the same support.

Where can I get more information?

For more information on the flu and caring for a sick child, contact Health Links-Info Santé at 788-8200 or 1-888-315-9257 or your primary health care provider.

For more information on fever in children, please see the fact sheet *Caring for a Child with a Fever*.