

Family Doctor Tips on Caring for Children with Respiratory Symptoms

Most respiratory illness in children, including colds, influenza, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and COVID-19 can be managed at home without the need for prescription medications. However, in some cases, it is important to seek medical care.

Below, family doctors share tips on how to decide when to seek care for a respiratory illness and how to support your child at home.

Call your family doctor if your child:

- Has a fever lasting 72 hours.
- Has a fever that went away for a day or longer (without fever medication) and then came back.
- Is unusually irritable and won't stop fussing, even after treating their fever.
- Has an earache lasting more than 48 hours.
- Is not eating or drinking. Note that it's normal to eat and drink less when sick. Liquids are more important than food and having no or notably fewer wet diapers can indicate a significant decrease in liquid intake.
- Has special needs that make caring for them more difficult.



As a parent or guardian, you know your child best. If you feel your child needs to be seen by a family doctor, please reach out for help.



Not sure what to do? Health Connect Ontario has a [symptom checker](#) and the option to [chat live with a nurse](#). You can also [call 811](#) to speak with a nurse, available 24 hours a day.

Call 911 or go to the emergency department when:

- You are worried that your child is seriously ill.
- Your infant, younger than three months old, has a fever.
- Your child is struggling to breathe or is breathing faster than normal.
- Your child has signs of dehydration with dry mouth or no urine for more than 8 hours.

These are only some examples of when to seek emergency care. Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) has more information to [help decide if your child needs emergency care](#).



Helping your child at home

- **Fever:** Treat fever or pain with over-the-counter medicines such as acetaminophen or ibuprofen if your child can take it. As a reminder, Aspirin or products containing acetylsalicylic acid (ASA) are not recommended for children.



Call your family doctor or pharmacist for advice if you are having difficulty accessing over-the-counter medicines. Information from the Canadian Pediatric Society outlines [how to take a child's temperature](#) and what to do if they have a fever.

Your child's age will determine the right temperature-taking method.

Orally (by mouth) and axillary (under the armpit) with an appropriate thermometer are preferred. Fever strips (forehead stickers) are not recommended as they are not accurate. Here is a video on [managing fever in a child](#) from the U.K.'s National Health Service.

- **Red eyes and discharge:** These symptoms almost always go away on their own, without antibiotic drops or other medication. Warm compresses and artificial tears can help reduce discomfort.
- **Stuffy and runny nose:** Try saline rinsing sprays, a humidifier or a nasal aspirator.
- **Earache:** If you notice your child tugging on their ear, they may have an earache. Get assessed if your child's earache lasts more than 48 hours, if there is discharge from the ear or they have had more than 2-3 ear infections in the last year.
- **Cough:** Treat a cough with a humidifier or steam from a shower. If the cough sounds like a bark, cool outside air may help. If your child is at least one year old, you can give them 1-2 teaspoons of honey in the evening.
- **Fluids:** Make sure your child gets enough fluids, including water, soups, fruit juice or even popsicles. Breastmilk/formula is enough for young babies who do not drink other fluids.

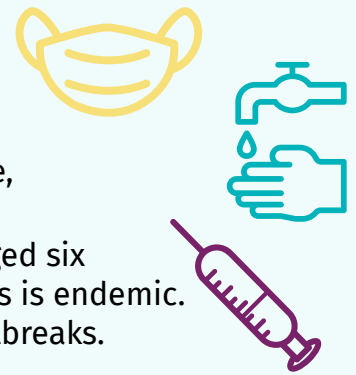
Tips to stay healthy and prevent illness

- Ensure immunization against RSV with Beyfortus® for infants less than eight months of age and high-risk children up to 24 months old. Details are available in this [RSV factsheet](#) from the Provincial Council for Maternal and Child Health.
- Get the flu shot and keep COVID-19 doses, especially for those a higher risk of developing severe illness, up to date. Contact your family doctor or local pharmacy to see if they are offering the vaccines.
- Consider wearing a mask (and having your child wear a mask) when in crowded, public indoor spaces especially when there are [high levels of respiratory illness in the community](#).
- Wash your hands often and well; use hand sanitizer when washing is not possible.
- Cough and sneeze into your elbow instead of your hands.
- Stay home and keep your child home when they are sick, especially in the first couple of days when most infectious.



Tips to stay healthy and prevent illness

- Ensure pertussis (whooping cough) immunizations are up to date. “Tdap” doses are recommended at ages two, four and six months, and four and 14 years. Pregnant individuals should also get one dose, ideally between 27-32 weeks of gestation.
- Speak to your family doctor about the measles vaccine for infants aged six to 12 months old if travelling to a country or countries where measles is endemic. The CDC maintains [this list](#) of the top ten countries with measles outbreaks.



*The OCFP thanks Dr. Kate Miller and Norfolk Family Medical for the **blog post** which inspired this information.*

