

## Children - when to see the doctor

One of the major concerns for parents of young children is to know the difference between a serious illness and a trivial one. When is a child's irritability or lack of interest in food just a result of tiredness or a cold, and when is it the first sign of a more serious condition?

### It's important to pick up the early signs

Sometimes, especially during the early stages of an illness, it is difficult even for doctors to pick up the signs of something more serious. Yet, the earlier the signs of an illness are detected, the sooner treatment can be started. This is important, especially for infants and younger children, who have less reserve than older children and whose condition can rapidly deteriorate.

### Signs to watch out for

Here are some of the important signs to watch for:

- **Drowsiness** - the infant or young child is less alert than usual and less aware of what is going on around them. The more drowsy the child, the greater the chance of a serious illness.
- **Less activity** - the young child is less active than usual; they may want to be held or cuddled. The infant may move arms and legs less than usual.
- **Breathing difficulty** - breathing may be very rapid, shallow, noisy (as in croup) or the child may grunt with each breath. Sometimes parents may notice that the muscles around the ribcage get sucked in each time the infant breathes, or that the lips are blue.
- **Poor circulation** - this is not an easy sign for parents to pick up. The hands and feet may be cold (though this is relatively common) and the infant may look much paler than usual.
- **Poor feeding** - breastfed infants suck less strongly than usual and for shorter periods of time; bottlefed babies also seem disinterested in feeding and take less than half the amount of milk they usually drink in 24 hours.
- **Poor urine output** - the infant has less than four wet nappies in 24 hours.

### Also get help when you see these signs

Parents should also seek urgent medical attention if their child:

- Vomits green fluid.
- Has a convulsion (fit).
- Has a very high fever (a high fever is more serious for an infant than an older child).
- Stops breathing for more than 15 seconds (apnoeic episode).
- Has a lump in the groin (hernia).
- Is pale and drowsy and has a high fever.

It is very important that you seek medical advice if you have any concerns about their infant or child. The sooner illness is detected, correctly diagnosed and appropriately treated, the better chance of a good outcome. Parents or carers should return to see the doctor promptly if the child seems to be worse or a new rash has appeared.

### Where to get help

- Your doctor
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)

- The Maternal and Child Health Line is available 24 hours a day Tel. 132 229.

## Things to remember

- If signs of illness are picked up early, treatment can be started sooner.
- It's important to act quickly, especially with very young children.
- Never be afraid that your doctor will be critical because you are worried about your child.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Royal Children's Hospital - Centre for Community Child Health

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