

## When to Seek Medical Care

### How do I know when to call the Pediatrician or seek emergency medical care for my child?

Knowing how to recognize when your child is sick and needs medical attention is important, both to get your child help when he needs it and to prevent unnecessary visits to the doctor or emergency room. As a parent, you know your child better than anyone else. Trust those instincts when dealing with your child's health.

Most parents call their pediatrician when their child has a fever. However, it is important to keep in mind that a fever is not the only sign of a serious illness. Whether or not your child has a fever, if he is very irritable, confused, lethargic (*doesn't easily wake up*), has difficulty breathing, has a rapid or weak pulse, is refusing to eat or drink, is still ill-appearing even after the fever is brought down, has a severe headache or other specific complaint (*burning with urination, ear pain, if he is limping, etc.*), or if he has a fever and it is persistent for more than 24 to 48 hours, then you should call your pediatrician or seek medical attention immediately.

#### Fever

Fever is a symptom that can accompany many childhood illnesses, especially infections. In general, you should call your pediatrician if: Your infant under three months of age has a rectal temperature above 100.4° F; your infant aged three to six months has a temperature above 101° F; or your infant six or more months has a temperature above 103° F. Children of any age with a fever over 105° F should be seen immediately.

For older children, it is not so much the number, but rather how your child is acting that is concerning. If your older child is alert, active and playful, is not having difficulty breathing and is eating and sleeping well, or if the temperature comes down quickly with home treatments (*and he is feeling well*), then you don't necessarily need to call your doctor immediately. Also, you should call your pediatrician if your child has a fever and another medical condition (*heart disease, cancer, sickle cell, immune system problems, etc.*).

#### Vomiting

Vomiting typically accompanies diarrhea as part of an acute gastroenteritis or stomach virus in kids. It is usually not



concerning if your child has only vomited a few times, is keeping small amounts of fluids down, doesn't have significant abdominal pain and is not dehydrated.

You should seek medical attention for vomiting if your child is getting dehydrated (urinating less often, dry mouth, weight loss, etc.), is vomiting dark green bile (bilious vomiting is a sign of an intestinal obstruction), is a newborn or young infant with projectile vomiting (pyloric stenosis) or, if he has a severe headache or abdominal pain. Vomiting is especially concerning if it begins after your child already has abdominal pain, which often happens in children with appendicitis.

#### Coughing

A cough and runny nose occur commonly in children with colds. If your child is otherwise feeling well, then you don't necessarily need to go to the pediatrician every time your child has a cold, even if he has a green runny nose. You should see the pediatrician if your child's cold symptoms continue to worsen after three to five days, if they aren't improving in ten to fourteen days, or if he has another specific complaint, such as ear pain or trouble breathing. Coughing that is dry and mostly occurs at night can be a symptom of asthma and should be reported to your child's pediatrician

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### **Trouble Breathing**

Children often have a cough and sometimes a wheeze when they have a viral upper respiratory tract infection. If your child is having difficulty breathing, you should call your child's pediatrician or seek emergency treatment. You can usually recognize trouble if your child's breathing is fast and hard, if you can see his ribs moving in and out (retractions), or if he can't catch his breath.

### **Dehydration**

Children most commonly get dehydrated when they have diarrhea and vomiting, from ongoing losses of fluid. It is also possible to get dehydrated if your child just isn't drinking well. The first sign of dehydration is that your child will urinate less frequently (your child should be urinating every six to eight hours). Other signs include a dry mouth, not having tears when crying, sunken eyes and decreased activity or increased irritability.

### **Irritability**

Fussiness accompanies many childhood illnesses. An important way to tell if your child is 'too fussy' is whether or not he is consolable. If your child is fussy and crying, but is easily calmed when you hold him, then that is less concerning than a child who cannot be consoled.

### **Lethargy**

If you call your pediatricians' office and say that your child is lethargic—a favorite word among many parents—you are likely to be told to bring your child in right away. Being lethargic, in medical terms, is usually an emergency and means your child is difficult to wake up. Many people use the term to mean that their child's activity has decreased.

If your child is really lethargic and difficult to wake up, then you should seek medical attention right away. It is less concerning if he is awake and alert and is just not as active as usual.

### **Rashes**

Children commonly get rashes from having sensitive skin, warts, poison ivy and as part of some illnesses, such as: Chickenpox, fifth disease and roseola. In general, you should call your doctor if your child has a rash and a fever, especially if the rash is purple and doesn't blanch or fade briefly when you press on it or an itchy rash that isn't relieved with home remedies.

### **Other Symptoms**

Other symptoms that are usually concerning and require medical attention include, but are not limited to:

- Coughing or vomiting blood or having bloody diarrhea, especially when accompanied by a fever
- Persistent pain, whether abdominal pain, a headache or knee pain. If your child has severe pain, especially if it limits his mobility and isn't relieved by home remedies, then you should call your doctor
- Seizures, especially if your child doesn't generally have a seizure disorder such as febrile seizures or epilepsy
- Testicular pain, which is usually a medical emergency
- Head injuries, especially if your child had a loss of consciousness or is acting unusual
- Cuts and scrapes that require stitches, including those with persistent bleeding, or if the wound is deep and gaping or the skin doesn't come back together
- A severe allergic reaction that includes trouble swallowing or breathing
- A severe headache, especially if your child also has a stiff neck, irritability, vomiting or fever
- Pain when urinating, which can be a sign of a urinary tract infection
- Weight loss, which is hardly ever normal in children and can be a sign of a more serious or chronic illness
- For children with chronic symptoms, such as headaches or stomachaches, you should call your pediatrician if your child's symptoms worsen

### **Parenting Problems**

Your pediatrician should also be a good resource for you when you have parenting problems. Many parents only make appointments for medical problems, but you can also make an appointment or call when your child has sleep or behavior problems, difficulty potty training, problems at school, etc. Don't wait until the problem is out of control. Some early help or advice may help prevent bigger problems from developing.

### **Conclusion**

When in doubt, trust your instincts and call your child's pediatrician when your child is sick, especially if you think that it is serious. You should also call your child's pediatrician if symptoms are worsening, even if he was recently seen. ❖

NOTE: The information presented here is informational and



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educational and in no way should take the place of professional medical care. ❖

### *About the Author...*

*Vicky K. Scott, R.N.C., N.P., has a Master of Science Degree in Nursing from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She is a Certified Nurse Practitioner and Certified Neuroscience Registered Nurse. Vicky has many years of varied clinical experience, including being a Nurse Practitioner with Neurosurgical practices in Ann Arbor, Michigan and Lexington, Kentucky. She has experience as a Clinical Nurse Specialist in neuroscience at Genesys Regional Medical Center, working closely with the trauma team and neurosurgeons treating acute traumatic brain injury. Vicky also has four years experience providing primary care in a rural Michigan Family Practice. Vicky will lead the Nursing Team at Rainbow's NeuroRehab Campus.*

### *References:*

*[www.About.com/Pediatrics](http://www.About.com/Pediatrics)*

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RainbowVisions Magazine  
Rainbow Rehabilitation Centers, Inc.  
5570 Whittaker Road, Ypsilanti, MI 48197, USA  
E-mail: [rainbowvisions@rainbowrehab.com](mailto:rainbowvisions@rainbowrehab.com)