



NHS

Childhood illnesses your guide

Know what to do,
what to look for
and where to go



All children experience common illnesses like coughs, colds and chickenpox; they are all part of growing up.

Antibiotics are not needed for every illness and using them unnecessarily means they are less likely to work when we need them and could expose your child to side effects.

Instead, treating your child's illness yourself or with advice and medicines from your local pharmacy, can often be the easiest and quickest way to help your child get better.

This starts with a well-stocked medicine cabinet, which should be kept securely out of your child's reach. Be prepared with a digital thermometer, children's liquid painkillers, decongestant or vapour-rub, oral rehydration sachets, antiseptic cream, calamine lotion, teething gel and plasters.

You can also get medical advice from your GP, health visitor, midwife, school nurse or by calling NHS 111 for free, 24 hours a day. In most cases you can get the help and advice you need from these professionals rather than going to A&E.



Coughs and Colds

Symptoms

Runny or blocked nose, sneezing, sore throat, cough, headache, mild fever, tiredness, aches and pains.

What can you do?

There is no medical cure for a cold and you can only treat the symptoms.

Increase the amount of fluid your child normally drinks. If your child has a fever, pain or discomfort, offer them children's paracetamol or ibuprofen by following the dosage instructions. Nose drops from the pharmacy or rub-on decongestant may help your child breathe more easily. A cough is nature's way of clearing the air passages. If your child is over the age of one, try a warm drink of lemon and honey.

What to look out for

If your child has a cough that has not gone away after a week, or also has a high temperature and is breathless, ask your pharmacist for advice.

Sore Throat

Symptoms

Pain or soreness in the throat especially on swallowing, hoarse voice, feeling unwell, tired with a mild fever.

What can you do?

Viral infections are the cause of most sore throats so antibiotics will have no effect in most cases. Simple painkillers, such as children's liquid paracetamol can be an effective way of alleviating any pain or discomfort. Cold drinks or ice cream are often soothing.

What to look out for

If the sore throat continues for more than four days, there is a high temperature or your child has difficulty swallowing liquids, together with neck pain, call NHS 111 or see your GP.

High Temperature

Symptoms

A high temperature or fever is 38°C or higher and is a symptom of many common illnesses. A fever helps the body to fight infections by stimulating the immune system.

What can you do?

Keep your child cool by undressing them to their underwear. Keep their room cool (18°C or 65°F) and open a window if necessary. Reduce night-time bedding to a light cotton sheet. Encourage your child to drink cool, clear fluids. Give children's liquid paracetamol or ibuprofen regularly always checking the instructions for the right dose and for how often it can be given.

What to look out for

If the temperature gets worse despite attempts to bring it down or if the fever is accompanied by confusion, drowsiness, difficulty breathing or sensitivity to light, seek medical advice from NHS 111.





Ear Infection

Symptoms

Earache (usually on one side), congested cold, fever, feeling unwell, irritable, frequent ear rubbing and poor appetite.

What can you do?

Give pain relief such as children's liquid paracetamol or ibuprofen. Place your child in an upright position with pillows, a warm towel held against the ear may be helpful. Children's decongestants from the pharmacy may also give some temporary relief. Most ear infections resolve within two or three days without antibiotics- during this time medicine for the pain may help. Ask your pharmacist for further advice if needed.

What to look out for

If the earache persists, ask your pharmacist or health visitor for advice, call NHS 111 or see your GP.

Earache can also be caused by other things such as teething or even swimming.

Croup

Symptoms

A harsh barking cough accompanied by wheezy breathing. It usually occurs in children aged one to five years and often develops when they have a heavy cold.

What can you do?

A humid or moist atmosphere will ease your child's breathing. Supervise your child in the bathroom or shower with the hot taps running to create steam. Prop up your child's bed to help their breathing.

What to look out for

If the croup persists, call NHS 111. If your child has significant difficulty breathing, seek immediate medical attention e.g. 999.



Diarrhoea & Vomiting

Symptoms

It is common for young children to get an upset tummy from time to time. This will usually cause one or more of three symptoms: vomiting, diarrhoea and stomach pains. If your child is otherwise well it is likely the diarrhoea and vomiting will get better on its own within 24 hours.

What can you do?

It is important to drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration. Avoid giving solid foods and encourage small, frequent sips of water or oral rehydration fluid. Also avoid fruit juice, cow's milk or squash, as these drinks can worsen diarrhoea.

What to look out for

If the diarrhoea and vomiting persists or worsens, or your child becomes more unwell, contact your GP.



Constipation

Symptoms

Poos become hard and difficult or painful to pass. Motions are passed less often or there is a change from usual bowel habits. May be accompanied by feeling bloated or sick.

What can you do?

Make sure your child drinks plenty of fluids and eats a mixed diet which includes lots of fibre, fruit and vegetables. Most cases will resolve in time or seek advice from your pharmacist.

What to look out for

If the constipation persists or worsens, see your GP.





Rashes

Symptoms

Childhood rashes are very common and are often a result of a viral infection or simply due to heat, food or if you have changed your washing powder.

What can you do?

If a rash is very itchy, try to keep your child cool and apply calamine lotion to the skin by following the instructions. Encourage your child to rest and keep an eye on them for any signs of illness. Make sure your child is drinking plenty of fluids. Ask your pharmacist to recommend a cream for applying to the skin to provide relief.

What to look out for

If you are concerned, do the glass test on the Meningitis page. If rash gets worse or any other symptoms develop seek advice from your health visitor or GP.



Stings and Bites

Symptoms

Within the UK common insects that may sting or bite include wasps, bees, mites, ants, fleas and mosquitoes. The skin may turn pink, red or mottled and there could be a painful blister.

What can you do?

Most cases of bites or stings can be treated at home or will get better without any treatment. However, extra relief can be provided by cleaning the area and then applying local anaesthetic or antihistamine cream. If stung by a wasp or bee then remove the sting as quickly as possible using tweezers before applying the cream or ointment.

What to look out for

An allergy to wasp and bee stings can cause a severe reaction or even anaphylactic shock. The symptoms can vary including narrowing of airways leading to breathing difficulties, wheezing, swelling around the eyes, lips, hands and feet together with sore itchy eyes. If these symptoms occur call 999 immediately.

Bumps and Bruises

Symptoms

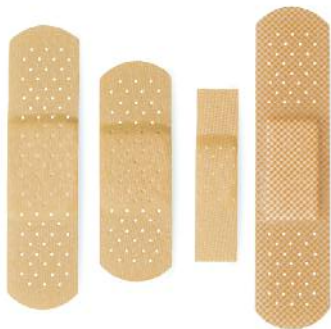
Children will get bumps and bruises as a normal part of growing up. Most bruises will disappear after approximately two weeks.

What can you do?

If the bump starts to swell, soak a flannel in cold water and place it on the area for a few minutes to reduce any swelling. Check regularly that your child is playing and behaving as usual.

What to look out for

If your child continues to complain that it hurts, this could indicate a more serious injury and you should call NHS 111.



Burns and Scalds

Symptoms

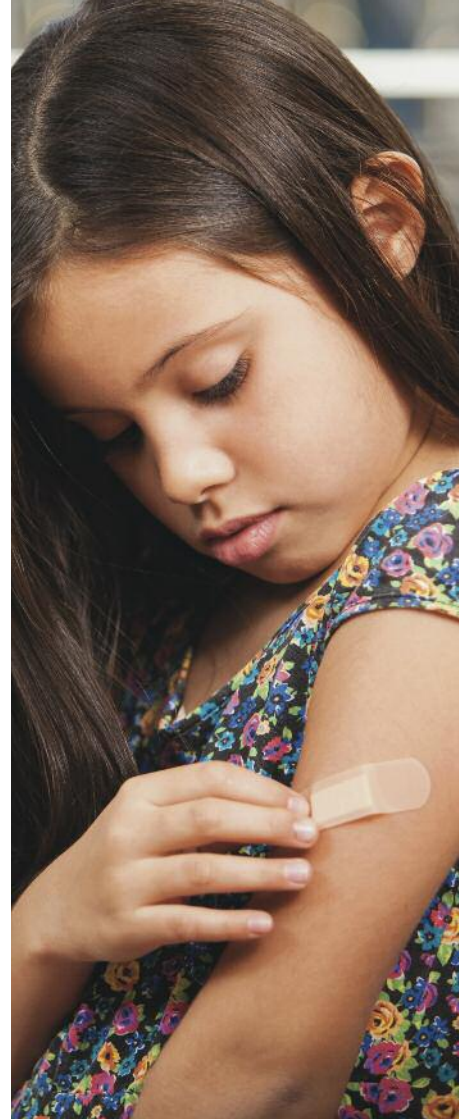
Burns are caused by dry heat, such as hot objects or the sun. Scalds are caused by hot liquid and steam. The skin may be painful and look pink, red or mottled together with blisters.

What can you do?

The burn or scald should be cooled as quickly as possible. Run it under cold water for at least ten minutes.

What to look out for

If the burn or scald covers a large area or the damage is deep into the skin, cover the area with a sterile dressing or non-fluffy material like cling film or a clean plastic bag and seek urgent medical attention e.g. from your GP or A&E.





Head Lice

Symptoms

Head lice are tiny (pin-head sized) grey-brown, wingless insects which live by sucking blood from the scalp. Their eggs are laid at the base of the hair and are known as nits. These will hatch out in seven to ten days with the empty egg sacs sticking to the hair. Head lice can be found on all hair colours and types regardless of whether hair is dirty or clean. The scalp will feel itchy and may be worse behind the ears or on the back of the neck.

What can you do?

There are two options available for treatment. These are medicated treatment such as shampoos or scalp lotions available from your local pharmacy. Or the 'wet combing' method which is the systematic removal of live lice by combing through the hair with a plastic detection comb.

What to look out for

You will need to check every member of your family for head lice if your child has them.

Whichever option you choose to treat the head lice, it is important to recognise that neither will protect against re-infection if head-to-head contact is made with someone with head lice at a later date. Check your child's hair regularly (every one to two weeks) using a plastic detection comb.

Threadworms

Symptoms

Threadworms are small, thin, white cotton-like worms that live in the gut. They are common in children, but may infect all household members and are not usually harmful.

At night, the worms lay their tiny eggs around the anus which causes itching. Scratching to relieve the itching whilst asleep can make the area sore with severe cases causing the child to be irritable. Infection may spread to the vagina in girls which can result in a discharge. Often there are no symptoms.

What can you do?

The usual treatment is for the whole family to take a medicine to kill the worms which can be obtained from your local pharmacy and to undertake the following hygiene measures for two weeks after treatment.

- Wear clean underpants or pyjamas at night.
- Bath or wash around the anus each morning.
- Change and wash bed linen, nightwear, cuddly toys every few days.
- Keep fingernails short.
- Wash hands and scrub under fingernails every morning, after using the toilet, changing nappies, and before eating.
- Make sure everyone uses their own towel and flannel.

What to look out for

Most cases can be treated at home but seek medical advice from your pharmacist if:

- your child has frequent infections.
- treatment does not stop the itching after three weeks.
- there is a general loss of appetite or weight loss.

Chicken Pox

Symptoms

Chicken pox is extremely common as it is highly infectious; being spread by coughing, sneezing or by directly touching the rash. Characterised by a red, itchy rash which blisters and crusts over within two weeks. A mild flu like illness is usually present before the appearance of the rash. Your child may suffer from a fever, body ache, headache, nausea and loss of appetite.

What can you do?

No specific medical treatment is required. Pain relief such as children's paracetamol can help if your child has pain or a fever. Antihistamines or calamine lotion may help with the itching. Children should stay at home until the blisters have crusted over and avoid contact with pregnant women.

What to look out for

Chicken pox is usually mild but once in a while complications can occur. The most common is infection of the rash if it blisters, if you have concerns call NHS 111.



Meningitis

Symptoms

Meningitis means swelling of the lining around the brain and spinal cord. It can be hard to recognise at first. Symptoms can appear in any order but the first symptoms are usually fever, cold hands and feet, vomiting, headache and feeling unwell, just like many mild illnesses.

Further symptoms include:

- Severe headache.
- Stiff neck
(less common in young children).
- Dislike of bright lights
(less common in young children).
- Very sleepy, vacant or difficult to wake.
- Confused or delirious.
- Seizures.
- Rash (anywhere on the body but not present in all cases).

Babies and toddlers may also:

- Refuse to feed or eat.
- Not want to be held or touched.
- Have a stiff body with jerky movements, or floppy, unable to stand up.
- Have a tense or bulging soft spot (fontanelle) on the top of the head.

What can you do?

The glass test

You can check a rash by pressing the side of a clear glass firmly against the skin. If the rash fades and loses colour under pressure it is not a meningitis rash. If the spots DO NOT change colour, you should seek medical help immediately.

What to look out for

Meningitis is NOT a minor illness. Trust your instincts - If you suspect your child may have some of the signs and symptoms **act fast and seek medical advice immediately e.g. A&E.**

Being prepared

**Be aware of the signs and symptoms of serious illness.
Be prepared on how to cope if an accident happens.**

What can you do?

It would be ideal to have your own first aid kit at home which contains everything you may need in an emergency. Basic items would include plasters, sterile dressings, cotton wool, adhesive tape, antiseptic liquid or cream, insect cream, pain relief, scissors, tweezers and disposable gloves. Speak to your local pharmacist who will advise on the contents of your medicine cupboard and first aid kit so they are fully equipped.

Remember to keep all medicines out of the reach of children and to check them regularly for their use-by dates.



Choose the right service for your needs

Self Care

Grazed knee, sore throat, cough.
Ensure your medicine cabinet is well-stocked and visit www.selfcareforum.org for guidance on Self Care.

Pharmacist

Diarrhoea, minor infections, headache, painful cough, runny nose.
To find your local pharmacy visit www.nhs.uk/service-directories

NHS 111

Call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not an emergency.
NHS 111 is free from landlines and mobiles 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year.

GP Surgery/Health Centre

Continuing ear pain, fever, stomach pain, vomiting and other illnesses.
To find your local GP surgery visit www.nhs.uk/service-search or call NHS 111.

A & E or 999

Choking, chest pains, heavy bleeding, cannot breathe, serious burns, fractures.
To find your local A & E visit www.nhs.uk/service-search or call 999.

For more information:

NHS Choices

www.nhs.uk

National Pharmacy Association

www.npa.co.uk/askyourpharmacist

Consumer Health Information Centre

www.chic.org.uk

Self Care Forum

www.selfcareforum.org

Child Accident Prevention Trust

www.capt.org.uk

West Essex Clinical Commissioning Group

www.westessexccg.nhs.uk