

Back to School Illnesses...Please Don't Spread the Lovebugs

By Dr. Melissa Arca, M.D., with permission from Confessions of a Dr. Mom, Sept. 17, 2012

It's inevitable. Children will get sick. I have yet to meet a child in school who went the whole school year without coming down with something. That being said, there are measures we can take to lessen the chances of our children falling prey to some of these viruses.

First, I will outline 5 of the most common culprits causing illness in the preschool and school age child during Fall and Winter. Then I will give you some practical tips on containing these viral bugs.

Hand Foot Mouth Disease: This is most commonly caused by the *coxsackie virus* and peaks in the summer and early Fall. This virus affects mostly young children (children under 10). The symptoms consist of a fever, decreased appetite, and sore throat. Usually painful mouth sores develop on the tongue, inside of cheeks and back of throat. This may or may not be accompanied by the non-itchy skin rash on palms and soles of feet.

The Common Cold: Your child may be afflicted with this a few times a year. The most common culprit here is the *rhinovirus* though there are several different viral strains producing symptoms of the common cold. Hence, several colds can be caught during one season. The symptoms vary but most commonly include: stuffy nose, sore throat, cough, mild fever, and sneezing.

The Flu: Ahh...the dreaded flu. *Influenza* and it's various strains cause the dreaded flu symptoms. As opposed to the common cold, the flu gives more pronounced and severe symptoms: high fever (usually over 100.4), sudden onset of symptoms, profound body aches, headache, and general malaise with decreased appetite. With the common cold, respiratory symptoms such as sneezing, congestion and cough are more prominent than in the flu. So far, the only preventive medical defense we have against this is the seasonal flu shot. This year, the [CDC](#) reports that there will be a trivalent seasonal flu shot to include the H1N1 strain as well as two other influenza strains. These should be available at the end of September.

Strep Throat: Unlike the above conditions, this one is caused by a *bacteria (Group A Strep.)* and not a virus. So, this must be treated with antibiotics. So how do you tell the difference from a common sore throat (viral pharyngitis) and strep throat? Here are the key differences: strep throat involves a higher fever (usually above 101 F), red and swollen throat with possible pus formation, absence of cough, and swollen lymph nodes in neck. Strep throat may also be accompanied by abdominal pain, possible vomiting, and a body rash.

Gastroenteritis aka the “stomach flu” is caused by several different types of viruses, most notably *rotavirus and adenovirus*. The most prominent symptoms are vomiting and diarrhea. Some children may only have the vomiting, some only the diarrhea, and the unlucky ones will have both. This may be accompanied by fever and stomach ache. Having the so-called “stomach flu” does not mean you have the “flu” as in influenza.

I picked the above 5 conditions because they are by far the most common this time of year and they are highly contagious. There is just no way around it. Okay, so having thrown all that at you, what can you do to help minimize and contain these nasty viruses?

1. **Frequent hand washing** is the number one way to help prevent the spread of these bugs. Encourage and teach your child to wash their hands several times throughout the day. Before eating, after using the potty, after playing outside, etc. Have them sing a song while washing to make sure they wash long enough (ABC song is a good one).
2. **Carry sanitizer.** I always wipe my kids’ hands as soon as they get into the car from school. This time of year, it’s just a good habit. Wipe down shopping cart handles too.
3. **Encourage children to sneeze and cough into their arms or a tissue.**
4. **Keep children home** if they have a fever, are vomiting, or have significant diarrhea. Of special note: keep them home if they have eye drainage, this could signify a [conjunctivitis](#) and should be evaluated by a doctor.
5. Teach them **not to share drinking cups or utensils** with their friends.
6. By all means, **sanitize the toys and personal items** in your house after a bout with any of the above.
7. Make sure your children **get enough sleep, eat well balanced meals, and exercise regularly.** All of these will help insure that their immune systems stay in tip top shape.

Treatment: Since the above, with the exception of strep throat, are caused by viruses, antibiotics will not help. Keep your child comfortable by treating their fever with a fever reducer. Give plenty of fluids and rest. With the stomach flu, keep your child’s diet bland and make sure they stay hydrated with small and frequent amounts of liquids.

Possible Complications: Secondary infections can set in following colds or the flu. Ear infections and pneumonia are common secondary infections. Watch for fever recurrence, chest pain, difficulty breathing, or worsening cough. Dehydration can set in following a bout of gastroenteritis. Stay on top of your child’s liquid intake. These conditions should be evaluated by your child’s pediatrician.

Do not hesitate to contact your child’s pediatrician whenever you’re concerned or have questions regarding your child’s health.

Good Luck to all of you this Fall and Winter season. Unfortunately, these bugs will make their way into our households just make sure your child gets plenty of rest, fluids, and love.

We’ve already battled a short bout of gastroenteritis and a nagging cold. How about you? Have your children been afflicted by any of these back to school bugs yet?

