

Protect Your Child from the Flu



Updated for the 2024-2025 flu season

The flu (influenza) is caused by a virus that's easy to spread, especially among kids in school or daycare. A child's immune system is not as well developed as an adult's. Also, their lungs and airways are smaller. So, any respiratory viral infection can lead to serious complications. This means that the flu can make children, particularly infants less than 6 months old, very sick. Also, children in daycare or school are very likely to bring the virus home to other family members.

Experts strongly advise getting a flu vaccine to protect yourself, your family, and others. Now this is even more important, as flu, COVID-19, and RSV viruses are all likely to spread during flu season. People at high risk for complications from the flu are also likely to be at high risk for serious problems from COVID-19 or RSV, so it's important to get a flu vaccine. Flu vaccines cause antibodies to develop in the body about two weeks after vaccination which provide protection against flu.



Flu symptoms

Flu symptoms often come on quickly. Symptoms include:

- High fever
- Headache
- Feeling very tired (fatigue)
- Dry cough
- Sore throat
- Runny or stuffy nose

- Muscle aches or body aches
- Acting tired, being fussy, or cranky most of the time

Children may also have upset stomach and vomiting. Some symptoms such as fatigue and cough can last many weeks.

A point to remember: "Stomach flu" isn't the flu; it's gastroenteritis (inflammation of the lining of the stomach and intestines).

To protect your child

Here's how you can help your child stay healthy:

- Have your child get a flu vaccine every year, as soon as it's available in your area. This is your child's best chance to prevent the flu. The flu vaccine is recommended every year for babies 6 months and older, children, and teens.
- Teach your child to wash their hands often, the right way: wet, lather, scrub, rinse, and dry. Your child should wash for at least 20 seconds. If your child needs a timer, try humming the "Happy Birthday" song from beginning to end twice. Have your child rinse well and dry using a clean towel.
- Use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol, if soap and water are not available. *Always supervise your child when he or she uses hand sanitizer to prevent swallowing alcohol.*
- Avoid other people who are sick, when possible.
- Don't let your child drink from the same cup or use eating utensils that others have used. And don't share foods.
- Teach your children to cough or sneeze into their elbow, sleeve, or a tissue. Teach them to wash their hands afterward.

If your child gets sick

- Give your child plenty of fluids, such as an electrolyte solution, water, juice, and soup.
- Your child can eat foods while having a fever but do not force the child to eat. Often children with flu do better on a bland diet. It is made up of foods that are soft, not very spicy, and low in fiber. You may try:
 - Breads, crackers, and pasta made with refined white flour.
 - Refined hot cereals, such as oatmeal and Cream of Wheat.
 - Fruit juices that are diluted by mixing half water and half juice. Do not give your child too much fruit or apple juice.
- Make sure your child gets plenty of rest.
- Keep your child at home to prevent the spread of germs. Do so until at least 24 hours after the fever is gone.
- Use children's strength medicine for symptoms. Discuss over-the-counter (OTC) medicines with your child's healthcare provider before using them. Note: Don't give OTC cough and cold medicines to a child younger than age 6, unless your child's healthcare provider tells you to do so. Never give children adult medicines.
- Talk to your pharmacist if you have any questions about OTC medicines for your child.
- Don't give your child or teen aspirin. Aspirin can cause a rare but serious condition called Reye syndrome.

- Don't give ibuprofen to an infant age 6 months or younger.
- Ask your child's provider about antiviral medicine. If taken within the first 2 days of the flu, it can help your child have fewer symptoms and get well sooner.
- **Managing Fever:** Strictly follow your healthcare provider's instructions about how much and how often you should give the fever medicine. Always check the instructions on the package. You may also follow these tips:
 - Do not bundle up your child with blankets or extra clothes, even if he or she has the chills. Try one layer of lightweight clothes and a lightweight blanket for sleep.
 - Your child's room should be comfortable, not too hot or too cool. Use a fan at low speed, if the room is hot or stuffy.
 - Give a lukewarm bath or sponge bath to help cool the fever.
 - Do not use cold baths, ice, or alcohol rubs. These often cause shivering and make things worse.

When to call your child's healthcare provider

Call your child's healthcare provider if your otherwise healthy child has:

- Fever (see Fever and children, below)
- Fever with rash
- Seizure
- Trouble breathing or taking feeds
- Worsening symptoms, or new symptoms, especially after a period of improvement
- Signs of dehydration. These include decreased urination (diapers not as wet as usual in a baby or toddler), dry mouth, and no tears when crying.
- Your child does not act alert or more comfortable when their fever goes down.

Call 911

Call 911 if your child has:

- Bluish-tinged skin
- Trouble waking up or is not alert
- Severe or continued vomiting

Fever and children

Use a digital thermometer to check your child's temperature. Don't use a mercury thermometer. There are different kinds and uses of digital thermometers. They include:

- **Rectal.** For children younger than 3 years, a rectal temperature is the most accurate.
- **Forehead (temporal).** This works for children age 3 months and older. If a child under 3 months old has signs of illness, this can be used for a first pass. The provider may want to confirm with a rectal temperature.
- **Ear (tympanic).** Ear temperatures are accurate after 6 months of age, but not before.

- **Armpit (axillary).** This is the least reliable but may be used for a first pass to check a child of any age with signs of illness. The provider may want to confirm with a rectal temperature.
- **Mouth (oral).** Don't use a thermometer in your child's mouth until they are at least 4 years old.

Use a rectal thermometer with care. Follow the product maker's directions for correct use. Insert it gently. Label it and make sure it's not used in the mouth. It may pass on germs from the stool. If you don't feel OK using a rectal thermometer, ask the healthcare provider what type to use instead. When you talk with any healthcare provider about your child's fever, tell them which type you used.

Below is when to call the healthcare provider if your child has a fever. Your child's healthcare provider may give you different numbers. Follow their instructions.

When to call a healthcare provider about your child's fever

For a baby under 3 months old:

- First, ask your child's healthcare provider how you should take the temperature.
- Rectal or forehead: 100.4°F (38°C) or higher
- Armpit: 99°F (37.2°C) or higher
- A fever of _____ as advised by the provider

For a child age 3 months to 36 months (3 years):

- Rectal or forehead: 102°F (38.9°C) or higher
- Ear (only for use over age 6 months): 102°F (38.9°C) or higher
- A fever of _____ as advised by the provider

In these cases:

- Armpit temperature of 103°F (39.4°C) or higher in a child of any age
- Temperature of 104°F (40°C) or higher in a child of any age
- A fever of _____ as advised by the provider

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