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Influenza Care for Children

How to care for children with influenza

Symptoms to look for in children

Influenza can be more severe in children younger than five years of age and especially for those younger than two years of age. Children with influenza may have the same symptoms as adults, but there are some differences in babies and toddlers. For example:

- Fever may be the only symptom of influenza a young child has;
- Severity of fever in young children with influenza, especially those under the age of three years can vary significantly –
 - Toddlers and babies usually have higher temperatures, often over 39.5 C (103.1 F)
 - Some infants may have only a very mild fever or no fever at all.
- Some babies may not be able to drink fluids or breast feed;
- Seizures or stiff neck may appear in some babies. Young children may also have headache, vomiting, irritability and sensitive eyes;
- About half of the children three years of age or younger have symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and stomach pain;
- Influenza viruses may cause croup (coughing), pneumonia or bronchitis in young children;
- Ear infections and red, sore eyes are more frequent in young children. Sore muscles are also common.

Note: Toddlers and babies may be irritable, eat poorly, have a hoarse cry and a barking cough.

Children older than five years of age and adolescents usually have the same symptoms as adults.

How to care for a child with influenza

- For fever and muscle aches:
 - Take the child's temperature first (if you are able);
 - Use acetaminophen according to instructions on label or advice from a health care provider;
 - Ibuprofen is another option, but it should **not** be used for babies younger than six months of age;
 - Do not wake the child to give the medication.



Note: Children younger than 18 years of age should **NOT** take acetylsalicylic acid (ASA) or any products containing ASA. Combined with influenza, ASA may cause Reye's syndrome, a very serious condition affecting the nervous system and liver.

- Dress the child in lightweight clothing and keep room temperature at 20 C (68 F).
- Breast feed or offer oral rehydration solution e.g. Pedialyte[®], water or juice often while the child is awake. Oral hydration solution can be purchased from pharmacies and grocery stores.
- Do not use cool baths or alcohol rubs.
- Encourage the child to rest or involve them in quiet activities.
- Try saline nose drops for stuffy nose or cough.
- Use a clean humidifier with the following conditions:
 - Always follow the manufacturer's directions for the use and proper care of your humidifier to reduce growth or spread of mold and bacteria that can grow in the water tank;
 - Failure to maintain your humidifier can result in additional health problems.

Over-the-counter medication

Before using a product you should know:

1. How to use it (e.g., how much to use and how often);
2. How long to use it;
3. The possible side effects; and
4. When to seek medical attention.

Note: Over-the-counter medications treat symptoms only, and are not a cure for the illness. Speak with your health care provider or call [Health Link Alberta](#) if you have questions.

- [Read more on over-the-counter medications](#)

When to seek medical care for a child

Almost all children with influenza have fever. So whether or not a child has a fever is not helpful as a sign of how severe their illness is. **Seek medical care** if a child is ill and has any of the following conditions when sick with influenza:

- Is younger than six months old;
- Has a fever that continues to rise or stays the same after being treated with fever medication.
- Has a change in breathing (such as breathing fast) or difficulty breathing;
- Is very listless and loses interest in playing, watching TV, eating or drinking;
- Is very irritable and cries a lot;
- Urinates less than usual, for example:
 - Has a dry diaper for more than three hours if younger than six months of age;
 - Has a dry diaper for longer than six hours if 6–23 months of age;
 - Goes to the bathroom less often than every six hours while awake if two years of age or older;
- Looks very ill and the care giver is worried;
- Has heart or lung disease or any chronic illness requiring regular medical care;
- Has a disease or is receiving treatments that weaken the immune system;
- Takes ASA regularly for a medical condition.

When to take a child to the emergency room

Call 911 right away if the child:

- Has severe trouble breathing and it is not caused by a stuffy nose;
- Has blue lips or hands, suddenly becomes pale, or has cold legs up to their knees;
- Is very tired or unable to move;
- Is sleepy and doesn't respond when you try to get them up;
- Shows signs of pain, such as headache or stiff neck, especially if they also have fever, are listless and their eyes are sensitive to light;
- Seems confused;
- Has a seizure.