

Signs Your Child Might Be Sick



Highlights

If your child is eating, behaving, and playing normally, they are probably not very sick.

Common symptoms of childhood illness include fever, vomiting, diarrhoea, pain, rash, and cough.

If your child has a fever for more than 2 days, or pain that doesn't go away with medicine, or if they are passing less urine than normal or not drinking well, it's a good idea to take them to the doctor.

If your child is under 3 months old and has a fever, they should see a doctor straight away, even if they don't seem sick.

Parents know their child best, so if you're worried, take them to the doctor.

In This Article

How can I tell if my child is sick?

What symptoms should I look out for?

How do I check my child's temperature?

How can I tell if my child has a serious illness?

When should I take my child to the doctor?

When should I call an ambulance for my child?

Tools and Assistance

How Can I Tell if My Child is Sick?

The best guide to your child's state of health is their behaviour. If they are happy and active and if they are playing and eating as they usually do, they are probably not very sick.

A sick child may:

Be unsettled or irritable

Lose interest in playing or be unusually quiet and inactive

Not want to eat

Feel hot to touch

Look tired, flushed, or pale

Shiver or complain of feeling cold

What Symptoms Should I Look Out For?

Fever

A fever is a temperature over 38°C. Most of the time, fever itself is not harmful. It's a sign that your child's body is fighting an infection. How high the fever is doesn't tell you how serious the infection is.

However, if your baby is under 3 months old and has a fever, take them to the doctor straight away, even if they have no signs of being sick. This is important because young babies are at higher risk of complications from infections, and the signs of a serious infection may not be very obvious.

Occasionally, a fever can cause a seizure in some children. Most of the time this isn't harmful, but you should call an ambulance to take them to the hospital for further checks.

Drowsiness

If your child is feeling sick, they may be sleepy and not interested in playing. However, you should take them to the doctor straight away if:

They seem very drowsy and don't wake up easily
They don't have enough energy to cry loudly
They seem floppy when you pick them up

Breathing Changes

If you notice any changes in your child's breathing, take them to the doctor straight away. You might notice:

Fast or noisy breathing
Grunting sounds with each breath
The skin between their ribs sucking in with each breath

If your child has difficulty breathing or becomes unwell very quickly, call emergency services and ask for an ambulance.

Dehydration

Dehydration occurs when your child doesn't have enough fluid in their body. If your child has a fever, doesn't want to drink, or is losing fluid through vomiting or diarrhoea, they could become dehydrated.

If your child is drinking less than half their usual amount, or if they are passing less urine than usual, they could be dehydrated and should see a doctor.

Other Symptoms

A child who is feeling sick may also have:

Vomiting
Diarrhoea
Pain
A cough
Low appetite
Tiredness
Pale skin or a rash

When to go to emergency for childhood illness

Take your child to the nearest hospital emergency department if they:



Infant with fever
Is less than 3 months old and has a fever.



Rash that doesn't change color
Develops a red or purple rash that does not lighten when pressed



Vomiting with concerning signs
Is vomiting frequently or vomiting green fluid or blood



Pain not relieved by medication
Has pain that isn't relieved by painkillers



Lump or swelling
Develops a lump or swelling



Difficulty breathing
Is struggling to breathe



Severe headache
Has a very bad headache



Light sensitivity
Complains that light is hurting their eyes

If any of these symptoms are present, do not delay - seek medical attention immediately!

How Do I Check My Child's Temperature?

Checking body temperature by feeling your child's forehead is not reliable. Always use a thermometer.

There are different types of thermometers, and the results may vary depending on what you use. Good options are:

A digital or mercury thermometer, which is placed under the tongue or in the armpit. Don't place it under the tongue in children younger than 4 years.

A digital ear thermometer, which can be used in children older than 3 months. Plastic tape or infrared thermometers used on the forehead are not reliable.

Some thermometers are more suitable for particular age groups, so follow the manufacturer's directions to get an accurate reading, or ask your doctor or child health nurse for advice.

How Can I Tell if My Child Has a Serious Illness?

Pay attention to how your child looks. They may have a serious illness if they:

Are unusually drowsy or floppy

Have pale, purplish, or blueish skin

Have difficulty breathing, are taking fast, shallow breaths, or are grunting while breathing
Are dehydrated
Have severe pain that doesn't go away
Have a seizure
Are vomiting repeatedly, or if the vomit has a green tinge or contains blood

It's important to know the symptoms of meningococcal disease. This is a medical emergency, and early diagnosis and treatment are vital. Think about meningitis if your child is unwell and has:

A bad headache
Stiffness when moving their neck
A purple or red rash that does not turn skin-coloured when pressed
Difficulty looking at light
A bulging fontanelle (the soft spot on top of your baby's head)
A high-pitched cry

When Should I Take My Child to the Doctor?

Your child should see a doctor straight away if they look unwell or have any symptoms of a serious illness. Parents know their children best - if you're worried, that's a good enough reason to take them to the doctor.

Your child should also see a doctor if they:

Are less than 3 months old and have a fever
Have had a fever for more than 2 days
Have pain that doesn't go away with pain-relieving medicine
Have been drinking less than half their normal amount or are not feeding well
Are not passing some urine every 6 hours
Are refusing to use their arm or leg
Have a swollen joint

When Should I Call an Ambulance for My Child?

You should call an ambulance if your child:

Becomes unwell very quickly
Is very drowsy or not responding to you
Has difficulty breathing or their lips turn blue
Stops breathing for short periods
Has a seizure
Has symptoms of meningococcal disease

Tools and Assistance

If you think your child's condition requires urgent medical attention, call emergency services and ask for an ambulance, or take them to the emergency department of your nearest hospital.

If you're unsure if your child's illness is serious, call a health advice line to speak to a registered nurse for more information and advice.