

## Health Advice – Common Ailments and Children's Illnesses

**For free 24 hour expert health and advice contact NHS Direct on 0845 4647**

### Back Pain

If the pain was caused by misuse such as lifting heavy weights, be sensible and take things easy. Avoid activity and posture that increases the pain and rest in whatever position gives relief. Aspirin, Paracetamol or Ibuprofen will not only help relieve the pain but will help to relieve inflammation. It is advisable to consult the Doctor if pain persists for more than a few days or if severe, so stronger painkillers such as coproxamol can be prescribed.

### Burns

Apply as much clean, cold water as possible to the whole area as fast as possible-seconds count. Keep cool water flowing over all the area until the pain subsides. This may take as long as 15 minutes. If the skin is unbroken or blistered, apply a loose dry dressing. If the burn is larger than 3 inches (8 cms) in diameter or the skin is broken and you are concerned consult your Doctor or local Accident Department as soon as possible.

### Colds & Influenza

Cases of colds and flu normally start with a cough and runny nose, aches and pains and a raised temperature. Both the common cold and flu are caused by viruses. Antibiotics will not help treat either condition as they have no effect on viruses. Only if your child has a secondary bacterial infection of Bronchitis will your GP consider prescribing antibiotics. Make sure the child gets plenty of rest and ensure they take in adequate amounts of liquid. Use recommended doses of Paracetamol to control aches and pains.

### Coughs

Coughs are common with viral infections. They can either be dry (no mucus) or productive (mucus is formed). A dry cough may sometimes sound like a bark, where it is referred to as Croup, or wheezy and mimics asthma. A productive cough will lead to a rattly chest sound, as if mucus is being brought up. Younger infants will tend to swallow the mucus they produce, which may lead to vomiting with a bout of coughing. This is perfectly normal. Coughs in children can be very persistent and may last several weeks. In babies this may be due to a continuing presence of the infective organism, and in older children because of sensitisation of the mucus lining of the windpipe. With time the cough will pass and the child recover.

*Please note* - for the vast majority of coughs, antibiotics are of absolutely zero value to your child as most coughs are caused by viruses. Antibiotics do not have any effect on viruses, only on bacteria - a different type of infectious organism altogether. Antibiotics will help if your child develops Bronchitis (an inflammation of the bronchi in the lungs) which is caused by a bacterial infection. A clue to whether your child has developed bronchitis and needs a course of antibiotics is the type of phlegm produced. With viral infections mucus is generally white or clear. A bacterial bronchitis infection creates large amounts of green or yellow phlegm, and it is recommended in this instance to consult your GP for an assessment and antibiotic prescription if bronchitis is diagnosed. For all other coughs, all that can be done is to alleviate the symptoms. Steaming and vaporising are effective in soothing sore throats caused by coughs.

### Earache

Earache can be a very uncomfortable experience with high pain levels and may require stronger painkillers than Paracetamol. 90% of cases of earache do not require an antibiotic

prescription and will begin to resolve within a day or two. The most common cause is a virus that causes raised pressure in the ear and a feeling that the child is 'banged up'.

The pain can be made worse by lying down as this raises the ear pressure further and can make sleeping difficult. It is recommended that the child should have their head propped up with pillows or cushions when in bed. If earache starts or worsens in the night, seek medical advice in the daytime, as earache is not an emergency situation.

The eardrum will occasionally rupture and expel pus and possibly a little blood, providing rapid pain relief as this allows a drop in the pressure within the ear. This is nothing to panic about and is the body's way of helping to alleviate itself of the problem. The eardrum will repair itself inside of 4 weeks, and the chances of resulting ear trouble are remote, but do consult your GP during normal hours if this rupture should occur.

### **Fevers & Febrile Fits**

Fevers are most often caused by viruses. The body's natural defence is to produce a fever to fight the infectious virus. The onset of a fever can be sudden, rapid and very high. However, the good news is that children who get high fevers have a greater tendency to show rapid improvement. Fevers will often come and go and be worse in the evening. Children will complain of feeling cold and of shivering as the body temperature is rising. As the fever lessens the child will appear red, sweat and complain of feeling hot. Paracetamol are also recommended to reduce the fever and make the child more comfortable, but they also assist in reducing the risk of febrile fits in the under six age group. These fits are extremely uncommon, and the fever a child develops is actually a benefit in ridding the body of the virus.

A febrile fit is a convulsion that can be very frightening for the child and parent alike, but is not in itself dangerous. Danger lies, as with all fits, in inhalation of vomit or swallowing the tongue. If your child should fit, lay them over your knees with the head facing down. When they have overcome the fitting process, reduce the child's body temperature by removing clothing and giving them Paracetamol. Phone your GP or the out of hours service Harmoni on 0300 1301313 for further advice, assistance and reassurance.

### **Head Lice**

Head Lice are very common in schoolchildren. Contrary to popular belief they prefer clean hair and are not a sign of poor personal hygiene. Their short life cycle and rapid breeding has allowed recent generations to develop strong resistance to chemical

We recommend trying a chemical lotion from your pharmacist in the first instance, combined with regular daily combing with a nit-comb or stiff bristle brush after washing the hair to damage nits which should prevent them laying eggs and multiplying.

### **Meningitis**

Many viruses will cause a persistent headache, but parents should be vigilant for the signs and symptoms of Meningitis as failure to diagnose and treat early can have serious consequences. The signs that a child's headache may be due to meningitis that you should look out for are:

Cold skin with a grey appearance. High levels of tiredness/drowsiness. The child cannot curl up and touch their chin to their knees. The most important warning sign to be aware of is the presence of a rash that resembles a love-bite with blood under the child's skin. This rash does not blanch when pressed with a clear object such as a glass

### **Nosebleeds**

The traditional treatment is to pinch the soft part of the nose firmly for 10 minutes. We find, however, that it is more effective to pack the bleeding nostril with soft tissue that has been firmly rolled up into a lump the size of the little finger tip (the part covered by the nail). This allows you to carry on with hands free. If bleeding persists, make a larger lump of tissue, blow the nose clear then re-pack it.

## Sore Throats

As with coughs and colds, the majority of sore throats are caused by a virus, and therefore antibiotics will not help.

To alleviate the pain give your children Paracetamol or Cocodamol at the recommended doses and time intervals. Children over the age of twelve will find gargling with soluble Aspirin helpful, but children under 12 must not be given Aspirin.

## Sprains

Rest and elevate the part (e.g. ankle) and apply ice or a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a tea towel for about 15 minutes. Then put on a crepe bandage, elevate and rest until the discomfort has subsided. It may be painful for several days.

## Sunburn

Prevention is much easier than cure- apply a high factor (at least 15-20 and TOTAL sun block for babies and children) sun screen before you or your child goes into the sun. This is particularly important in breezy weather and from May to July and between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. (If your children have pale skin and red hair, go to shady woods, not the sunny beach!)

Treat sunburn like any other burn. Applying Calamine lotion may help a little, as well as taking Paracetamol, but sadly the real answer is to be more careful in the first place. Children are particularly susceptible to sunburn and great care should be taken to avoid over exposure. Sunburn can predispose to skin cancer in later life.

## Worms

Thread worms are common in pre-school children (and occasionally trouble older children and adults). They are spread via hand to mouth contact. They appear as tiny cotton thread-like worms in a child's motions and can cause itching in a child's bottom. Whilst unpleasant, thread worm are not dangerous.

Contact the surgery for some medicine to clear the infection (adults can buy treatment from a chemist).

## Family Medicine Chest

Here is a list of useful medicines, dressings and a description of their uses. All are quite cheap and worth stocking at home in readiness for minor illnesses. Keep them in a box or cupboard with a lock or store them well out of reach of children.

**Paracetamol Mixture** - For the relief of pain or fever in young children.

**Sedative Cough Linctus** - For dry or painful coughs.

**Vapour Rub** - For steam inhalations, also useful for children with stuffy noses or dry coughs. Rub on chest and nose.

**Antiseptic Solution** - One teaspoon diluted in warm water for cleaning cuts & grazes.

**Antiseptic Cream** - For treating septic spots, sores in the nose & grazes.

**Calamine Lotion** - For dabbing (not rubbing) on insect bites, stings & sunburn.

**Hydrocortisone 1% Ointment** - Use for dermatitis, insect bites & sunburn.

**Rehydration Solution Sachets** - For use in vomiting or diarrhoea, especially in small children. An alternative is fruit juice.

**Plasters** - For minor cuts.

**3" Wide Crepe Bandage** - To keep dressings in place. To support sprained or bruised joints.

**Cotton Wool** - For cleaning cuts & grazes.

**Thermometer** - For fevers.

**Tweezers** - For removing splinters.

**Antihistamines** - These can be useful in relieving inflammation from itchy rashes and other allergy symptoms such as sneezing, itching watery eyes and swelling associated with insect bites. The old fashioned antihistamines like Piriton can be sedative and useful at night and following sunburn. More modern antihistamines which are non-sedative are preferred for daytime use when drowsiness could be a problem or dangerous.

**Indigestion Remedy** - Chalky type tablets are helpful for indigestion and heartburn.

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