

Home Sick

When is a child too ill for school?/pool

By Camilla Cornell

It was a fall day as crisp as a September apple. My children and I were thrilled to be able to enjoy it, since we'd been cooped up for a good week waiting for two-year-old Ben's chickenpox to scab over. But as we headed over to our school's haunted house, we noticed that people were staring at Ben as if he had the plague. Some even crossed to the other side of the street as we passed. "He's not contagious," I found myself explaining to all and sundry. But it must have been hard to believe; with pockmarks all over his face and arms, he looked pretty bad.

The problem with many children's illnesses, says Leslie Rourke, a Goderich, Ontario family physician, is that they're often most contagious in the early stages, before there are any visible signs. Chickenpox, for example, usually starts out with a couple of days when the children just don't feel very well. "They may have a low-grade fever or a bit of a runny nose," says Rourke. "That's when they're highly contagious and the chickenpox spreads like wildfire. The rash doesn't start usually until a day or two later."

As parents, we can't do much to prevent the spread of childhood illnesses we don't know are there. But we can brush up on the basics when it comes to making sure we're not the neighbourhood version of Typhoid Mary (a real-life kitchen worker and typhoid carrier credited with the direct spread of the disease to at least 22 New Yorkers in the early 1900s). And quite apart from the question of infection, you don't want to send your child to school or daycare if

she's going to be miserable, tired or uncomfortable.

When it comes to deciding whether to keep your child home, advises Denis Leduc, a Montreal paediatrician and chairman of the community paediatrics committee for the Canadian Paediatric Society, there are four key factors: Is he still infectious? Does he have a fever? Is he rundown and lacking energy?

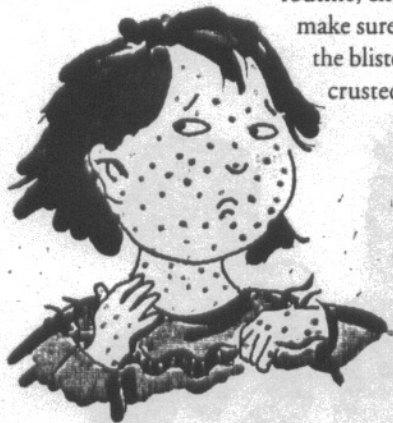
Is he vomiting? Here are some more specific guidelines from Leduc and Rourke for when children can return to school or daycare following the more common childhood ailments.



Chickenpox

One of the most contagious diseases, it begins its spread up to five days before the tell-tale rash becomes apparent, and is generally contagious for five to seven days after the appearance of the first crop of blisters. To determine whether your child should go back to her regular

routine, check to make sure all of the blisters are crusted over



and dry. The incubation period for chickenpox can range from 10 to 21 days, so if one of your kids gets it, you can expect it to show up in his siblings in a couple of weeks.

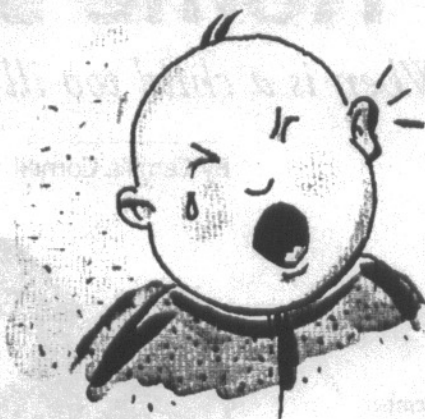
Colds and Flu

Children are most contagious two days before they develop symptoms and during the first few days of their illness when they're often feverish. "Once the fever drops, the degree of contagion diminishes significantly," says Leduc, "and they can go back to school." While cold and flu viruses can still be passed on through coughing and sneezing up to a week after the onset of illness, regular hand-washing and a hefty supply of tissues should halt the spread. Forget about keeping your child home every time he has a runny nose; he'd miss a big chunk of the school year if you did that. By the way, while many people believe green mucus signals an infection, Rourke says it's not a firm indicator.

Diarrhea

If your child has diarrhea but feels well, points out Leduc, it may not be contagious. But you're still going to want to keep her at home until she has control over her bowel movements again. If the diarrhea is accompanied by vomiting or fever, it could be a viral infection. If it contains blood or mucus, it may be a

bacterial infection. In this case, she shouldn't return to school until you've seen a physician for a stool test and received treatment, if necessary.



Ear Infection

This ailment can be quite painful for children and is often accompanied by a fever. It's not contagious, though, so children can go back to daycare or school as soon as they're feeling better. While a viral ear infection will not be helped by antibiotics, a bacterial infection will. Most often bacterial ear infections occur at the end of a cold or flu.

Head Lice

These tiny pests top most parents' icky list, but the treatment is swift. Children can generally go back to school after shampooing with a special solution intended to kill the active head lice (a 20-minute job), followed by hours of combing and picking out nits (eggs) — some schools unfortunately have a no-



nits policy, so you'll have to be extra careful before sending your child back. Be vigilant about checking her scalp, even after the shampoo treatment; she may require a second lather a week to ten days later.

Impetigo

If left untreated, this bacterial skin infection is easily passed on to others. It's characterized by red, oozing spots which usually begin on the face and eventually form yellow crusts. Twenty-four hours of antibiotic use is generally enough to prevent the spread, although some schools and daycares may not want your child back until the spots completely dry up.

Pink Eye (Conjunctivitis)

This inflammation of the eye has three causes: bacterial, viral and allergic. If an allergy is at the root of your child's irritated eyes, he can't pass it on to anyone else, and hence doesn't have to be kept home. Viral conjunctivitis is contagious, but since there's no treatment for it and it's generally not associated with a lot of discharge, Leduc says there's little reason to keep a child away from class.

Bacterial conjunctivitis, on the other hand, often results in a child waking up with one or both eyes crusted shut. Since your child is apt to rub his itchy eyes, he's likely to pass pink eye on to other children when he touches them. In this case, says Leduc, your child should be on antibiotics for a good 24 hours before you can say the pink eye's not contagious.



Pinworms

While these centimetre-long white worms found around the anus may give you the shivers, treatment is easy, quick and painless. Your doctor will give your child a single dose of medication and within 24 hours, she'll be rid of the worms. Or if you're positive it's pinworms and don't need confirmation from a doctor, you can go directly to a pharmacy and get over-the-counter medication that will do the trick.

However, Leduc cautions, if there is a rash of cases in a daycare, you may want to team up with the other parents and treat everyone at once, or risk the chance of reinfection. Since pinworm eggs are spread by hand-to-hand contact

or through the handling of dirty diapers, hand-washing can help halt new outbreaks.

Sore Throat

If your child has a sore throat accompanied by a runny nose and a cough, but no fever or swollen glands, then it's probably just a cold and he can return to school or daycare within a few days. If, however, he has no cold symptoms, but has a fever over 38°C (101°F) and swollen glands in his neck, he may well have strep throat, a bacterial infection that should be treated with antibiotics. The doctor will check to see if your child has pus on his tonsils and will probably do a throat swab. After 24 hours of antibiotics, your child should be able to return to his regular routine, providing he's no longer lethargic or feverish.

Viral Infections (e.g. Fifth Disease or Hand, Foot and Mouth Disease)

Both of these fairly common childhood diseases are characterized by a rash. In the case of fifth disease, the cheeks go



bright red as if they've been slapped, while children with hand, foot and mouth get blisters on the hands and feet and in and around the mouth. (Sometimes this ailment can present itself in different ways: blisters in the mouth only, or everywhere on the body except the hands and feet.)

Both are spread by coughing and sneezing and can be contagious for one or two weeks after the onset of the initial flu-like symptoms. Says Rourke, "You might want to keep them out of school for the first one to three days," during the time they would probably have a fever and a cough. "It's early on that

they're the most contagious."

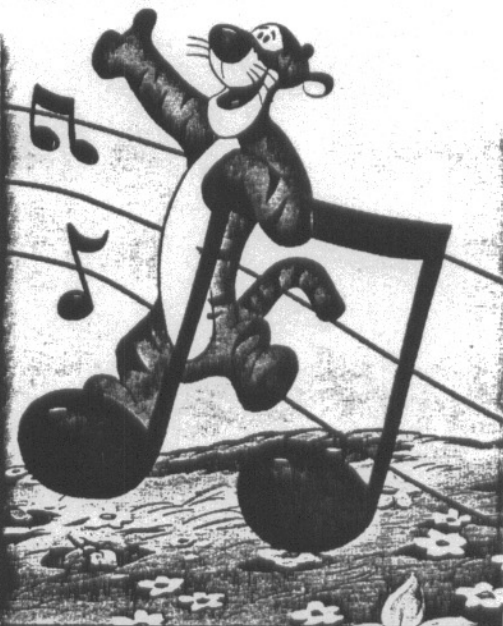
Vomiting

Your child may have vomited the night before and then awoken, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed in the morning. If she can keep down a light breakfast, Rourke says let her go to school. Leduc, on the other hand, recommends erring on the side of caution and waiting until 24 hours after the last episode of vomiting before packing your child off to daycare. "Often if they vomited the night before and they feel fine in the morning, the first mouthful they get at daycare will come right back up," he says. "Also, after 24 hours they're not in danger of dehydration." □

Resources

Everyday Pediatrics for Parents: A Thoughtful Guide for Today's Families, by Elmer R. Grossman, MD, Celestial Arts (Cdn. distributor Publishers Group West), 1996. A paediatrician of some 40 years, Grossman writes with comprehensive knowledge (and a sense of humour) about common childhood health concerns.

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