

How to Cope When Your Child Gets Sick

Balancing work and family life is never easy, but when your child is sick, it may seem impossible. How do you weigh the need to be at work against the need to be with your child? You may experience feelings of guilt because you cannot be with your child, or conversely, because you are missing work. You may feel enormous stress as you struggle to make alternate child care arrangements or shift your work schedule.

Illness is simply a part of life, especially during childhood, and caring for a sick child is part of the responsibility of being a parent. Research has shown that children between the ages of one and three average 8 to 9 illnesses a year. Children between the ages of three and ten years of age average 4 to 6 illnesses a year, while older children and adults will be sick 4 times a year. The best way to make those “down days” easier for yourself and your child is to develop a plan long before your child gets sick.

Here are some steps you can take to prepare for the day when your child is sick:

1. Inquire about your employer’s sick leave policy. If your employer grants paid sick time, can you use the time when your child is sick? You might also check the policy on working at home when your child is sick.
2. Ask your child care provider about the policy on sick children. Some programs do not allow children with runny noses; others are more flexible.
3. Arrange back-up care with relatives and friends in case your child is too ill to be in child care.
4. Develop a schedule with your family so you can work alternate days or split shifts if an emergency arises. Families are placed under enormous stress when parents must decide who will miss work. Children sometimes perceive themselves as causing the stress, and may feel they have done something wrong. By discussing the issue calmly, in advance, you can avoid tension.

Updated 1/26/05

When is My Child too Sick for Child Care?

The American Public Health Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommend that you keep your child out of child care *if*:

1. The illness prevents the child from being comfortable in group care
2. The provider is not able to meet the needs of your child without neglecting the health and safety of other children
3. The child has any of the following conditions:

Fever as described below accompanied by behavior changes or other signs or symptoms of illness:

Infants younger than 4 months—rectal temperature of 101.4°F or more

Children 4-24 months—rectal temperature of 101.4°F or more

Children older than 24 months—oral of 100.4°F or under-the-arm temperature of 99.4°F or more

- Unusual lethargy, irritability, persistent crying, difficulty breathing
- Uncontrolled diarrhea, vomiting
- Rash with fever or joint pain: until diagnosis confirms it is not measles or rubella
- Chicken pox, Impetigo, pinworms, ringworm, head lice, scabies: until 24 hours after initial treatment
- Strep: until 24 hours after initial treatment and no fever for 24 hours
- Conjunctivitis: until treated