

Types of Contagious Illness

Top 5 Culprits that Keep Kids Home from School

1. **Colds** – More than 200 different viruses are known to cause the symptoms of the common cold. Some occasionally produce serious illnesses. Others produce mild infections in adults but can precipitate severe lower respiratory infections in young children. Children have about 6–10 colds per year, while adults average about 2–4 colds per year.
2. **Gastroenteritis** – Commonly called “**stomach flu**,” though not akin to the flu for which we can be vaccinated, gastroenteritis is characterized by vomiting and diarrhea, which can lead to dehydration, particularly in young children. Gastroenteritis can be caused by viral, bacterial, or parasitic infections; however, viral gastroenteritis is highly contagious and is responsible for the majority of outbreaks in developed countries.⁴
3. **Ear Infections** (otitis media) – Respiratory illnesses, such as colds and allergies, cause congestion, which may squeeze shut a child’s eustachian tube – the tiny drainage pipe for the middle ear. Fluid trapped in the middle ear can become a breeding ground for viruses or bacteria (that’s why some ear infections go away on their own [viral] and some require antibiotics [bacterial]).¹ Although the ear infection itself is not contagious, a respiratory illness that causes the ear infection can be. Ear infections can be very painful, and the child should be kept comfortable during this period. If your child has not had fever for two days, is beyond the point of serious pain, and is not suffering from hearing loss, it is fine to send the child back to school.¹⁵
4. **Pink eye** (conjunctivitis) – Pink eye can be a viral or bacterial infection that results in inflammation of the clear membrane that covers the white part of the eye and lines the inner surface of the eyelids.¹
5. **Sore throat** – Most sore throats are caused by viruses, but about 15 percent of children’s sore throats are caused by streptococci – the bacteria

that causes strep throat. Fevers above 101 °F are common in strep throat, and swallowing can be so painful that the child may have difficulty eating.¹

Other Common Illnesses among Children

- **Chicken pox** – Itchy, fluid-filled blisters caused by a virus.⁵
- **Ringworm** – Skin infection caused by a fungus (not by a worm).⁶
- **Head lice** – Tiny insects that infest the hair of the scalp and sometimes eyebrows and eyelashes, resulting in intense itching and sometimes red bumps that become crusty and ooze.⁷
- **Impetigo** – Skin disorder caused by bacterial infection and characterized by crusty skin lesions. Typically, the infection begins as a cluster of tiny blisters, followed by oozing and the formation of a thick, honey or brown-colored crust that is firmly stuck to the skin.^{2,8}

Contagious Diseases of a More Serious Nature

- **Meningitis** – Viral or bacterial infection that causes inflammation of the membranes covering the brain and spinal cord. Symptoms may include fever and chills, nausea and vomiting, stiff neck, sensitivity to light, and mental status changes.⁹
- **Hepatitis** – Inflammation of the liver, which can be caused by an infection from parasites, bacteria, or viruses (such as hepatitis A, B, or C). Symptoms may include dark urine and pale or clay-colored stools, loss of appetite, fatigue, abdominal pain or distention, general itching, jaundice, nausea and vomiting, low-grade fever,¹⁰ weight loss, and breast development in males.
- **HIV/AIDS** – Viral infection caused by human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) that gradually destroys the immune system, resulting in infections that are hard for the body to fight. Any symptoms of illness may occur since

infections can occur throughout the body. Most individuals infected with HIV progress to AIDS (acquired immuno-deficiency syndrome – the most serious stage of HIV disease, which causes severe damage to the immune system) if not treated. People infected with HIV, however, may have no symptoms for up to 10 years, but they can still transmit the infection to others. The immune system gradually weakens until they are diagnosed with AIDS.^{2, 11, 12}

Modes of Transmission

Different types of contagious disease are transmitted in different ways:

- Through the **air** (i.e., breathed in through the respiratory system). Respiratory infections, such as colds and flu, are responsible for most illnesses. Other illnesses that are spread by airborne droplets include chickenpox, hand-foot-mouth disease, measles, mumps, whooping cough, and rubella.
- Through the touching of **feces** or items contaminated with feces (which is then transported through the mucous membranes by touching the mouth, nose, etc.). Some examples of illnesses spread through fecal/oral transmission include viral enteritis, E coli 0157:H7, Giardia, Cryptosporidiosis, Shingella, Salmonella, or Hepatitis A.
- Through the touching of **blood** or **body fluid** of an infected person with a non-infected person. HIV, Hepatitis B, and Hepatitis C are some examples of diseases transmitted through direct contact with the blood/body fluids of an infected person.
- Through **direct contact** with the virus, bacteria, or parasite by touching the skin or body fluids (nasal or oral secretions) of an infected person. Skin infections and infestations such as impetigo, lice, scabies, ringworm, and herpes simplex are generally transmitted through direct contact. Contact with nasal and oral secretions can spread illnesses such as chicken pox, influenza, measles, meningococcal meningitis, mumps, whooping cough, rubella, and pink eye.^{13, 14}

Handwashing is your first line of defense against all contagious illness. For more helpful information on reducing illness and infection see the following *HealthHints* issues:

Reducing Contagious Illness in the Child Care Setting and *MRSA – Antibiotic Resistant Staph Infection*.

Sources

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