

What Families Can Do to Reduce Illness from Infection in School

Sickness is a part of childhood, whether it's a fever, sore throat, cough or just not feeling well. According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), the typical child has six to twelve illnesses a year ranging from mild to severe symptoms. Illness can occur throughout the year, but tends to cluster in the winter due to the flu season. These illnesses can seem to spread like wild fire affecting other students, teachers, and family members. Families and schools need to balance the child's school attendance with the risk of spreading the illness to others in the school. Sometimes even minor illnesses require the child to stay home just to prevent the further spread of a contagious disease.

Sending a sick child to school hampers learning and spreads illness. If a student does not feel well in the morning, parents should delay sending the child to school until marked improvement is observed. Parents are reminded to call the school office for student illnesses or late arrivals. The school nurse monitors student trends in respiratory and GI illnesses, so please provide specifics about the student's symptoms and time the symptoms began when you call the school office.

Fevers are a protective mechanism that helps the body to fight infection. Students with fevers equal to or above 100 degrees Fahrenheit or symptoms of contagious or infectious diseases are sent home promptly and excluded from school and extended day while in that condition, per Virginia Department of Health regulations (St. Andrew's Parent/Student Handbook, 2012). Once the student is confirmed to be free of communicable illness by a healthcare provider or is fever free/symptom free for 24 hours *without taking anti-fever medications*, the student may return to school, extended day and/or extracurricular activities. Please note: if a child has been diagnosed with any kind of contagious disease such as strep throat or pink eye, **the child must take the prescribed medication for at least 24 hours before returning to school.**

When your child is sick, consult with your healthcare provider and use these tips to help you decide whether to keep your child at home:

1. If your child complains of not feeling well and has a fever, or if your child appears sick with any other symptoms, keep your child home and consult with your health care provider if symptoms do not resolve in two to three days.
2. Any rash associated with symptoms such as fever, trouble breathing or swallowing, or an ill appearance should be evaluated by your physician. Rashes that are itchy or scaly may be contagious and should be evaluated before sending a child back to school.
3. Cough alone may not prevent your child from attending school unless it is interfering with a child's sleep or ability to participate in school activities. If the cough is productive and has phlegm or is associated with fever or trouble breathing, keep your child home from school and arrange to have the child seen by the pediatrician.

4. Stool problems do sometimes require a child to stay home from school. This is especially true with diarrhea where the stool frequency is often many times an hour. Diarrhea that is bloody or associated with fever, abdominal pain, or vomiting should be evaluated by your healthcare provider.

5. A child with vomiting, with or without diarrhea, needs to stay home from school. Your child can return to school when the child is symptom free for 24 hours and can tolerate a regular diet.

6. Children can attend school with mild sore throats if no other symptoms are occurring. Any child with a sore throat associated with fever, vomiting, abdominal pain, or difficulty swallowing should be evaluated by a doctor before returning to school. Call your child's school nurse and ask if strep throat is going around; if so, have your child tested. A child with a diagnosis of strep throat needs to stay out of school until s/he has been on antibiotics for 24 hours and is fever free.

7. If your child appears to be really sick, keep your child home and arrange an evaluation by your physician that day. If you can't get through to your doctor and you are really concerned, either call 911 or bring your child to the nearest emergency room for evaluation.

Many illnesses can be stopped before they spread by reminding everyone to keep their immunizations current, practice frequent hand washing, blowing noses into tissues, covering mouths when coughing or sneezing, and asking other parents about their kids' sick symptoms before arranging play dates and carpools. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends an annual flu shot for all children from 6 months to 18 years old, and it is not too late to get this vaccine. For trusted child health information from the AAP, go to <http://www.healthychildren.org> and learn more about preventative health topics. Even the best hygiene practices can't avoid the spread of all seasonal illnesses. Sometimes staying home is the only way to benefit our kids, ourselves and our communities.