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# Childcare and children's health

An information sheet for parents

## Recognising serious illness in young children

No child enjoys perfect health all of the time. There are many different childhood illnesses and these vary in severity. Some are serious and require specialist care and treatment; others are not of great concern and get better quickly without any special treatment. The most common illnesses are the common viral infections that every child gets especially in the winter months. These are more common in those children who attend child care or preschool.

The signs and symptoms that suggest that a young child may be quite sick and need urgent medical attention include:

- **High fever:** A high fever in a young child is a sign of infection. Fever by itself is not necessarily an indicator of serious illness. The child's behaviour is more important than the degree of fever in deciding whether the child may have a serious illness that needs treatment. If the child is alert, playful, socialising normally, and eating and drinking well, then it is unlikely that there is any major cause for concern even in the presence of a fever.
- **Drowsiness:** Note whether the child is less alert than normal, making less eye contact, and less interested in his or her surroundings.
- **Lethargy and decreased activity:** The child wants to lie down or be held rather than participate in any activity, even those activities that would normally be of interest.
- **Breathing difficulty:** This is an important sign. The child may be breathing very quickly, or be blue around the mouth or the breathing may be noisy. The child may be working hard at breathing, with the muscles between the ribs being drawn in with each breath.
- **Poor circulation:** The child looks very pale, and his or her hands and feet are cold or blue.
- **Poor feeding:** The child has no appetite, and drinks much less than usual. This is especially relevant for infants.
- **Poor urine output:** There are fewer wet nappies than usual, again this is especially important for infants.
- **Red or purple rash:** Rashes are common in viral infections, however red/purple spots that do not become lighter with pressure require urgent medical referral, as this may be a sign of meningococcal disease.
- **Stiff neck or sensitivity to light:** This may indicate meningitis, though it is possible for infants to have meningitis without these signs.

These signs and symptoms cannot be relied on to say for certain that a child is seriously ill, nor does the absence of these signs and symptoms rule out serious illness. The more of the features described above are seen in a child, the more likely it is that he or she may have a serious illness.

If there is any doubt, then medical advice must be sought without delay. Remember that in infants and young children, illness can progress very quickly.



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