

Patient Education

COVID-19 and Children

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The Basics

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What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 stands for "coronavirus disease 2019." It is caused by a virus called SARS-CoV-2. The virus first appeared in late 2019 and quickly spread around the world.

People with COVID-19 can have fever, cough, trouble breathing, and other symptoms. Problems with breathing happen when the infection affects the lungs and causes pneumonia. Most people who get COVID-19 will not get severely ill. But some do.

This article is about COVID-19 in **children**. Information about COVID-19 in adults is available separately. (See "Patient education: COVID-19 overview (The Basics)".)

How is COVID-19 spread?

The virus that causes COVID-19 mainly spreads from person to person. This usually happens when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks near other people. The virus is passed through tiny particles from the infected person's lungs and airway. These particles can easily travel through the air to other people who are nearby. In some cases, like in indoor spaces where the same air keeps being blown around, virus in the particles might be able to spread to other people who are farther away.

The virus can be passed easily between people who live together. But it can also spread at gatherings where people are talking close together, shaking hands, hugging, sharing food, or even singing together. Eating at restaurants raises the risk of infection, since people tend to be close to each other and not covering their faces. Doctors also think it is possible to get infected if you touch a surface that has the virus on it and then touch your mouth, nose, or eyes. However, this is probably not very common.

A person can be infected and spread the virus to others, even without having any symptoms. Some strains or "variants" of the virus are more contagious than others and can be spread very easily.

Can children get COVID-19?

Yes. Children of any age can get COVID-19. They are less likely than adults to get seriously ill, although it can still happen.

Also, it is possible for children to spread the virus to other people. This can be dangerous, especially for people who are older or who have other health problems.

Are COVID-19 symptoms different in children than adults?

Not really. In adults, common symptoms include fever and cough. In more severe cases, people can develop pneumonia and have trouble breathing. Children with COVID-19 can have these symptoms, too, but are less likely to get very sick. Some children do not have any symptoms at all.

Other symptoms can also happen in children and adults. These might include feeling very tired, shaking chills, headache, muscle aches, sore throat, a runny or stuffy nose, diarrhea, or vomiting. Babies with COVID-19 might have trouble feeding. There have also been some reports of rashes or other skin symptoms. For example, some people with COVID-19 get reddish-purple spots on their fingers or toes. But it's not clear why or how often this happens.

Serious symptoms might be more common in children who have certain health problems. These include serious genetic or neurologic disorders, congenital (since birth) heart disease, sickle cell disease, obesity, diabetes, chronic kidney disease, asthma and other lung diseases, or a weak immune system.

Can COVID-19 lead to other problems in children?

This is not common, but it can happen. There have been rare reports of children with COVID-19 developing inflammation throughout the body. This can lead to organ damage if it is not treated quickly. Experts have used different names for this condition, including "multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children" and "pediatric multisystem inflammatory syndrome." The symptoms can appear similar to another condition called "Kawasaki disease." They include:

- Fever that lasts longer than 24 hours
- Belly pain, vomiting, or diarrhea
- Rash
- Bloodshot eyes
- Headache
- Being extra tired or acting confused or irritable
- Trouble breathing

Call your child's doctor or nurse **right away** if your child has any of these symptoms.

What should I do if my child has symptoms?

If your child has a fever, cough, or other symptoms of COVID-19, **call** their doctor or nurse. They can tell you what to do and whether your child needs to be seen in person.

If you are taking care of your child at home, the doctor or nurse will tell you what symptoms to watch for. Some children with COVID-19 suddenly get worse after being sick for about a week. The doctor or nurse can tell you when to call the office and when to call for emergency help. For example, you should get emergency help **right away** if your child:

- Has trouble breathing
- Has pain or pressure in their chest
- Has blue lips or face
- Has severe belly pain
- Acts confused or not like themselves
- Cannot wake up or stay awake

If you have a baby and they are having trouble feeding normally, you should also call the doctor or nurse for advice.

Should my child get tested?

If a doctor or nurse suspects your child has COVID-19, they might take a swab from inside their nose or mouth for testing. These tests can help the doctor figure out if your child has COVID-19 or another illness.

In some places you need to see a doctor or nurse to get tested. In other places, there are organizations that make testing available for anyone. Depending on the lab, it can take up to several days to get test results back.

If your child was in close contact with someone with COVID-19, what to do next depends on whether your child has recently had the infection:

- If your child **has not** had COVID-19 within the past 3 months – They should get tested if possible, even if they don't have any symptoms. Call their doctor or nurse if you aren't sure where to get a test. Whether or not your child is tested, they should self-quarantine at home after an exposure. This means staying home and away from other people as much as possible. The safest thing to do is to self-quarantine for 14 days. Some public health departments might allow people to stop quarantining sooner, especially if they get a negative test. If you're not sure how long your child should quarantine for, contact your local public health office or ask your child's doctor or nurse.
- If your child **has** had COVID-19 within the past 3 months – In this case, as long as the child has no symptoms, they might not need to get a test or self-quarantine. Ask your local public health office if you are not sure what your child should do.

If your child self-quarantines for less than 14 days, or if they do not need to self-quarantine, you should still monitor them for symptoms for the full **14 days**. If they start to have any symptoms, call their doctor or nurse right away. Your child should also be extra careful about wearing a mask and social distancing during this time.

How is COVID-19 in children treated?

There is no known specific treatment for COVID-19. Most healthy children who get infected are able to recover at home, and usually get better within a week or 2.

It's important to keep your child home, and away from other people, until your doctor or nurse says it's safe for them to go back to their normal activities. This decision will depend on how long it has been since the child had symptoms, and in some cases, whether they have had a negative test (showing that the virus is no longer in their body).

Doctors are studying several different treatments to learn whether they might work to treat COVID-19. In certain cases, doctors might recommend trying these treatments or joining a clinical trial. A clinical trial is a scientific study that tests new medicines to see how well they work.

How can I prevent my child from getting or spreading COVID-19?

In the United States, a vaccine to prevent COVID-19 is available for people 12 years and older. Getting your child vaccinated is the best way to protect them. It will also allow them to do more things safely, like seeing friends. Eventually, children under 12 will be able to get a vaccine as well, once experts have studied this more to make sure it is safe.

The more people who are vaccinated, the harder it will be for the virus to spread. More information about COVID-19 vaccines is available separately. (See "Patient education: COVID-19 vaccines (The Basics)".)

While we wait for vaccines to reach everyone, there are other things people can do to reduce their chances of getting COVID-19. These things will also help slow the spread of infection.

If your child is old enough, you can teach them to:

- **Practice "social distancing."** This means keeping people, even those who are healthy, away from each other. It is also sometimes called "physical distancing." The goal is to slow the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19. Keeping your child home is the best way to protect them and others. (See 'What else should my family know about social distancing?' below.)
- **Wear a face mask in public.** Experts in many countries recommend this for everyone, including children **2 years and older**. This is mostly so that if your child is sick, even if they don't have any symptoms, they are less likely to spread the infection to other people. It might also help protect your child from others who could be sick. Make sure the mask fits snugly against your child's face and covers their mouth **and** nose.

You can buy cloth masks and disposable (non-medical) masks in stores or online. You can also make your own cloth masks. Cloth masks work best if they have several layers of fabric.

- **Wash their hands** with soap and water often. This is especially important after being out in public. Make sure to rub the hands with soap for at least 20 seconds, cleaning the wrists, fingernails, and in between the fingers. Then rinse the hands and dry them with a paper towel that can be thrown away. Hand washing also helps protect your child from other illnesses, like the flu or the common cold.

Washing with soap and water is best. But if your child is not near a sink, they can use a hand sanitizing gel to clean their hands. The gels with at least 60 percent alcohol work the best. It's important to keep

sanitizer out of young children's reach, since the alcohol can be harmful if swallowed. If your child is younger than 6 years old, help them when they use sanitizer.

- **Avoid touching their face** with their hands, especially their mouth, nose, or eyes.

Younger children might need help or reminders to do these things.

If you work in health care, or have another job that puts you at risk for COVID-19, take care to follow your workplace's recommendations for prevention. These likely include measures like wearing protective gear and washing your hands before and after certain tasks. When you get home from work, consider changing out of your work clothes and shoes before you see your children. If a child in your home is at increased risk for severe disease, you might also choose to stay 6 feet (2 meters) apart and wear masks at home. Depending on the climate, you might also open windows or doors and use fans to keep air circulating.

What else should my family know about social distancing?

Keeping people away from each other is one of the best ways to control the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19. That's because the virus can spread easily through close contact, and it's not always possible to know who is infected.

Getting fresh air and staying active is good for children's health. It's also normal for them to want to see friends and play with other children. But it's important to be aware of the risks.

When you do go out, keep in mind that:

- The virus can spread both indoors and outdoors. But being outdoors is less risky.
- If you take your child to a public park or playground, it is best to go when it's not crowded.
- Children should be careful to stay at least 6 feet (2 meters) away from other people. If your child plays with friends, they might need reminders to keep their distance.
- The more people your child comes into contact with, and the more often you do this, the higher the risk of spreading the virus. For this reason, it's best to limit in-person play time with other children.
- Washing hands often and wearing a mask will also help lower the risk to your child and others.

Is my child safe at school or day care?

Decisions around how to run schools and day cares are complicated. Experts understand the importance of having in-person learning, activities, and childcare. But they also have to think about the risks to children, as well as teachers and other adults who work in these places.

In general, schools and other programs can run when there is a plan in place to keep everyone safe. This includes guidelines around:

- **Vaccines** – The more people who are vaccinated, the harder it is for the virus to spread. Some schools have policies to require staff to be vaccinated. Children 12 years and older should also get vaccinated to protect themselves as well as younger children who can't yet get a vaccine.
- **Masks** – Having all staff and children wear masks lowers the risk of spreading the virus.

- Cleaning and air quality – Staff should make sure everyone washes their hands frequently and that common areas are cleaned regularly. It's also important to make sure there is good ventilation (air flow) throughout the building.
- Distance – Classrooms and activity areas should be set up in a way that allows for distance between people. Some expert groups say 3 feet between people is enough if everyone is wearing masks and following other safety guidelines. Keeping people in the same groups, or "cohorts," also helps lower the risk of spread. Having activities outdoors whenever possible is also a good idea.
- Illness or exposure – Schools, day cares, and other programs should have clear rules around students and staff members staying home if they feel sick. There should also be a specific plan for what to do if someone tests positive or was exposed to the virus that causes COVID-19.

The exact plan for each program depends on many different things. These include the size of the building and what kind of ventilation it has, the age of the children attending, and how many cases of COVID-19 there are in the community.

What if someone in our home is sick?

If someone in your home has COVID-19, they should stay in a separate room if possible. They should also wear a face mask if they need to be around other people at all. Everyone in the house should wash their hands often and clean surfaces that are touched a lot.

If you are sick and you have a baby, it's important to be extra careful when feeding or holding them. Even though experts do not know if the virus can be spread through breast milk, it is possible to pass it to your baby or other children through close contact. You can protect your baby by washing your hands often and wearing a face mask while you feed them. If possible, you might want to have another healthy adult feed your baby instead.

How can I help my child cope with stress and anxiety?

It is normal to feel anxious or worried about COVID-19. It's also normal to feel stressed or lonely when you can't do your normal activities or see friends and relatives. And it can be hard to manage work and child care when your family has to stay at home.

You can help children by:

- Talking to them simply about COVID-19 and what they can do to protect themselves and others
- Making or buying them a face mask that is comfortable, and encouraging them to practice wearing it
- Limiting what they see on the news or internet
- Finding activities you can do together
- Finding safe ways to spend time with friends and relatives
- Taking care of yourself, including eating healthy foods and getting regular exercise

You can also help protect children by getting vaccinated yourself.

If your child is worried, you can remind them that most people do not get severely ill or die from COVID-19. It might also help to remind them that by staying home and wearing masks, your family is helping to protect other people in your community.

What if I have other questions?

Your child's doctor or nurse can help you with questions like:

- Should I reschedule my child's regular checkup appointment or vaccines?
- How can I make sure I have enough of my child's medicine or other medical supplies?
- How should I feed my baby if the formula I usually buy is not available in the store?
- Where can I find help if I don't have enough food for my family?

The answers to these questions will depend on your specific situation.

Where can I go to learn more?

As we learn more about this virus, expert recommendations will continue to change. Check with your doctor or public health official to get the most updated information about how to protect yourself and your family.

For information about COVID-19 in your area, you can call your local public health office. In the United States, this usually means your city or town's Board of Health. Many states also have a "hotline" phone number you can call.

You can find more information about COVID-19 at the following websites:

- United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): www.cdc.gov/COVID19
- World Health Organization (WHO): www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019

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