

Viral illness

What is a viral illness?

A viral illness is the name given to an infection caused by a germ known as a virus. Many different viruses can cause infection in children. Viruses can spread easily within families and between children when they are in close contact with each other. Viral infections are the most common cause of illness in children, and healthy children can have up to 12 viral illnesses a year in their first few years of life.

Most children recover fully within a week.

Signs and symptoms

Fever (high temperature) is the most common symptom but your child may also have:

- runny nose
- cough or sneezing
- increased tiredness
- eating or drinking less
- vomiting and/or diarrhoea

How is it diagnosed?

A doctor can usually diagnose a viral illness by examining your child. Tests are not needed unless your child is very unwell.

What is the treatment?

Viral infections cannot be treated by antibiotics.

If your child seems miserable or is in pain, Paracetamol (Panadol) and/or Nurofen (Ibuprofen) may help them feel more comfortable. Follow the instructions on the bottle for the correct dose for your child.

Care at home

- keep up your child's fluids (little sips more often may help)
- encourage your child to rest
- keep your child home from school or day-care until the fever settles and they feel well.

When should I see a doctor?

See a doctor if your child:

- is less than three months old and has a fever
- becomes increasingly sleepy and you have difficulty waking them
- drinks less than half their normal intake or stops taking any fluid
- passes urine less than twice during the day
- breathes very fast or you are worried about their breathing
- has any other health problems that concern you.

If your child has been sent home after being diagnosed with a viral infection and their symptoms get worse you should see a doctor again.

In an emergency, always call 000 immediately. Otherwise, contact your local doctor or visit the emergency department of your nearest hospital. For non-urgent medical advice, call 13 HEALTH (13 4325 84) to speak to a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week for the cost of a local call.

Things to remember

- Viral infections are very common in children.
- Most children will fully recover without any treatment within a week.

All information contained in this sheet has been supplied by qualified professionals as a guideline for care only. Seek medical advice, as appropriate, for concerns regarding your child's health. Resource No: FS351 developed by Emergency, Queensland Children's Hospital. Updated: August 2019

