

School health: The ABCs of staying healthy at school

Do you know why school kids get sick so often? The best ways to prevent illness in the classroom? Get the answers to these school health questions and more.

By Mayo Clinic staff

Does it seem as if your child is sick all the time? In the early school years, your child's immune system is put to the test. After all, young children in large groups are breeding grounds for the organisms that cause illness. Here's why infectious illness is so common — and what your child can do to stay healthy in the classroom.

How infections spread

Many childhood illnesses are caused by viruses. All it takes is a single child to bring a virus to school for the spread to begin. Consider this common scenario — a child who has a cold coughs or sneezes in the classroom. The children sitting nearby inhale the infected respiratory droplets and the cold spreads. Or perhaps a child who has diarrhea uses the toilet and returns to the classroom without washing his or her hands. Illness-causing germs might spread from anything the sick child touches to other children who touch the same object and then put their fingers in their mouths.

Why hand washing counts

Frequent hand washing is the simplest — and most effective — way to prevent illness, both at home and at school. Remind your child to wash his or her hands before eating and after using the toilet, blowing his or her nose, or playing outside. Suggest soaping up for as long as it takes to sing the ABCs, the "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" song or the "Happy Birthday" song.

Other school health tips

Common sense can go a long way toward preventing illness in the classroom. In addition to frequent hand washing, teach your child other school health basics:

- **Use hand sanitizer.** Give your child alcohol-based hand sanitizer to keep in his or her desk. Remind your child to use the sanitizer before eating snacks or lunch and after using a shared computer mouse, pencil sharpener, water fountain or other community objects. You might also donate disinfecting wipes to the classroom for general use.
- **Cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze.** Give your child a package of tissues to keep in his or her desk. Encourage your child to cough or sneeze into a tissue — then put the tissue in the trash, and wash his or her hands or use hand sanitizer. If it isn't possible to reach a tissue in time, remind your child to cough or sneeze into the crook of his or her elbow.
- **Keep your hands away from your eyes and out of your mouth.** Remind your child that hands are often covered in germs.
- **Don't share water bottles, food or other personal items.** Offer your child this simple rule — if you put the item in your mouth, keep it to yourself. The same goes for hats and other headgear. If your child shares pencils, markers or other classroom supplies, stress the importance of keeping them out of his or her mouth.
- **Avoid anyone who's sick.** Remind your child that sitting next to or playing with someone who's sick could lead to his or her own illness.

Of course, it's also important for your child to eat a healthy diet, get plenty of sleep and stay current on his or her immunizations — including a yearly flu vaccine. To prevent spreading illness at home, use the same tips for the entire family.