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Patient education: Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and children (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate
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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. In many areas, people have been told to stay home and away from other people. This is to try to slow the spread of the virus.

This article is about COVID-19 in children. Information about COVID-19 in adults is available separately. (See "Patient education: Coronavirus disease 2019 (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 within about 6 feet (2 meters) of another person. Doctors also think it is possible to get sick if you touch a surface that has the virus on it and then touch your mouth, nose, or eyes. This is similar to how the flu spreads, but the virus that causes COVID-19 spreads more easily.

A person can be infected, and spread the virus to others, even without having any symptoms. This is why keeping people apart is one of the best ways to slow the spread.

It is not known if the virus can be passed to a baby through breast milk if the mother is sick.

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, children can spread the virus to other people. This can be dangerous, especially for people who are 65 or 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.

Other symptoms that can happen in children and adults include feeling very tired, sore throat, a runny or stuffy nose, diarrhea, or vomiting. Some children do not have any symptoms at all.

In children who do get COVID-19, babies seem to be at higher risk for more serious symptoms. Serious symptoms are also more common in people, including children, who have certain health problems. These include heart disease, diabetes, lung disease (such as asthma that is not well controlled or cystic fibrosis), severe obesity, or cancer.

What should I do if my child has symptoms?

If your child has a fever, cough, or other symptoms, 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. They can also tell you when to call the office and when to call for emergency help. For example, you should call right away if your child:

- Has trouble breathing
Has pain or pressure in their chest
Has blue lips or face
Acts confused or not like themselves

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

Will my child need tests?

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

In some areas, it might not be possible to test everyone who might have been exposed to the virus. If the doctor cannot test your child, they might tell you to keep them home and away from other people, and call if symptoms get worse.

Your child's doctor might also order a chest X-ray or computed tomography (CT) scan to check their lungs.

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.

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

There is not yet a vaccine to prevent COVID-19. But there are things people can do to reduce their chances of getting it and 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.)
The United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also recommends that people, including children 2 years and older, cover their face when they need to leave the house. 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. You can use cloth or a bandana to cover your child's mouth and nose.

- 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.
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.

What else should my family know about social distancing?

When you are social distancing, you can still keep in contact with the people in your home, as long as everyone is healthy.

In many places, schools and day cares have closed temporarily. When experts recommend staying home and away from other people, it's important to take this seriously and follow instructions as best you can. Even if your child does not get very sick from COVID-19, they could still pass it along to others who could get very sick.

It is also important to avoid:

- Play dates
Group sports
Playgrounds

Children can still play outside, but should be careful to stay at least 6 feet (2 meters) away from other people.

What if someone else in our home is sick?

If someone in your home has COVID-19, they should stay in a separate room, and 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 can also be hard to manage jobs and school work when your family has to stay at home.

You can help your child by:

- Talking to them simply about COVID-19 and why "social distancing" is important
Limiting what they see on the news or internet
Finding activities you can do together
Staying in touch with friends and families
Taking care of yourself, including eating healthy foods and getting regular exercise

Your child's school might also have resources to help your child learn from home. This can also be a good way to stay connected with teachers and classmates.

If your child is worried, it can also help to remind them that most people do not get severely ill or die from COVID-19.

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?
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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