



Calling Your Child's Doctor

Many parents are uneasy about calling their child's doctor, especially after-hours or on weekends. The following information may help you feel better when your child is ill and you must call his or her doctor.

Plan Ahead

Concerns about your child can come up at any time. During a regularly scheduled well-child visit, discuss how calling about concerns is best handled. Many doctors have nurses who handle illness calls and advise parents.

Talk about the kinds of information the doctor will need so you will be ready if your child becomes ill and you need to call after-hours.

Prepare before you call. Before calling the doctor, spend a few minutes gathering your thoughts about your child. Review her behavior, eating habits, skin color, etc., to pinpoint what it is about your child's health that concerns you. (Examples: "He's had a fever like this before, but he seems so sluggish," or "I can deal with the diarrhea, but she's just not drinking anything.")

Write it down. Keep a list of the names and dosages of any medications your child is taking, including over-the-counter drugs. Be prepared to give your child's weight and allergies. Take your child's temperature so you know whether or not she has a fever.

If your child is crying or fussy, bring her near the phone so you can look right at her while you are describing what you see. Because many people become nervous when the doctor is on the phone, you may want to write down a brief history of the illness before calling. Note your child's symptoms in the order in which they happened and be as specific as you can in describing them.

You may also want to write down questions to ask your doctor. Remember, no question is silly if you are worried and don't know the answer. Have paper and pencil ready to write down instructions. The doctor will want to know the following: When did the problem start? How severe are the symptoms? Are the symptoms getting better, worse, or staying the same? How quickly is the illness getting better or worse? What treatment have you tried so far? How has it worked? How is your child right now? Has your child been exposed to an illness recently?

When You Call

Identify yourself and your relationship to your child. Give your child's name and age. Your doctor's staff may not immediately know who you are. To help them, mention any chronic illnesses or recent medical problems the child has had. (Examples: "She has asthma," or "He just got over chicken pox.") Be clear and assertive about what you are asking and what you hope to find out. Tell them how urgent the problem is to you.

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When You Call, continued

Getting through to the office

If you think your child is sick enough to be seen by the doctor, call early in the morning to assure that you can be seen quickly. If you are told the doctor or nurse will call you back, ask when they will return your call. Try to keep the phone line open for the return call. If your call is not returned 30 minutes after the call-back time, call again. If your child's condition gets worse after your first call, call the doctor's office again and explain your concerns. If you call your child's doctor with an emergency, state clearly that it is an emergency and don't allow your call to be put on hold. Life-threatening emergencies should be directed to 911.

Before hanging up

Make sure you clearly understand the instructions, what the effects of any treatment may be, when they will occur, what to do if the expected effects do not occur and what the danger signs are that show things are getting worse. Also find out if and when you need to make a follow-up appointment.

For More Information

- Your health care provider
- Children's Resource Line:
(206) 987-2500 or 1-866-987-2500
toll-free Washington, Alaska, Montana, Idaho
- www.seattlechildrens.org

This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Children's Hospital. However, your child's needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child's health care provider.

Children's

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