

## **FREQUENT ILLNESS**

Frequent illness is a common concern for parents of young children. The majority of these illnesses are caused by viruses: colds, stomach viruses, flus, etc. For children prone to ear infections or with asthma, the impact is much greater (see related handouts). During the winter months, when people are crowded indoors, the rate of infection is significantly higher. Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers can expect an average of 6 – 8 infections per year; by adolescence the expected average decreases to four.

The major reason for recurring illness is exposure to contagious infections. There are many hundreds of viruses so the potential for infection is great. Attendance at daycare is by far the biggest risk; the larger the group the more infections to expect. Younger siblings of school-age children are also likely to have frequent viruses. When a new virus attacks a child still recovering from a previous virus, the child is even more susceptible since his defenses are low. It is important to note that children exposed to cigarette smoke have damaged defenses and get more infections (and many other illnesses).

If your child is gaining weight well and has had routine infections, there is no cause for concern about an underlying disease. Children with immune defects or serious problems have unusual infections such as repeated bouts of draining boils, pneumonia, meningitis and other major infections.

### **SO WHAT CAN A PARENT DO?**

- Stop smoking (See handout on Passive Smoking)
- If your child has more viruses than average or you are worried about these, consider changing daycare arrangements. This may be especially an issue if your child's colds lead to ear infections or asthma attacks. Children may handle viruses better when they are a bit older.
- Realize that colds are inevitable and not serious; try to keep perspective.
- Realize that there is no medicine to prevent colds, to hasten recovery or to prevent complications. Antibiotics will not help colds. Cough and cold medicines provide partial, temporary symptom relief and should be used sparingly for older children only. Many herbal remedies are available, but have not been tested for safety, especially for young children and are not inspected for purity or for standardized concentrations. We do not recommend herbal medicines.
- Good nutrition and plenty of rest are helpful both for recovery and for resistance, but lots of extra vitamins are not necessary.
- Use common sense about dressing, bathing and weather. Colds do not come from getting a chill, washing hair, not wearing a hat, or being in the wind.

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