

Managing childhood illnesses

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, over 2.2 million children aged 0-5 years attended A&E every year, with rates increasing by 24% in the last six years¹ despite a falling birth rate and improvements in overall child health. The number of 0-5 years attending A&E during 2020-2021 was over 1.2 million.

Many of these presentations are avoidable or preventable, and will be relatively minor or self-limiting, when treatment elsewhere or self-care may be more appropriate.

Health visitors are in an ideal position to support parents' confidence in recognising and managing minor illnesses in childhood to drive down this form of A&E demand, including the provision of information related to antimicrobial resistance and the appropriate use of antibiotics.

The refreshed High Impact Areas for 0-5 years within the Health Visiting and School Nursing delivery model: reducing accidents and minor illness sets out the scope of the health visitors' role¹.

The reasons for the increase in children's urgent care presentations in recent years are complex and likely to be down to a number of factors, including the availability of services outside the hospital and changes in parental expectations and health literacy to manage minor illnesses.

Most importantly, these visits tell us that parents are worried and are either unable or unsure how to access the reassurance or advice they need in other ways.

Parents and carers can find it extremely stressful when their child is unwell. Whilst there is a huge amount of information available, parents report that finding something that provides clear and accurate information is not always easy.

It is important that parents receive consistent, high quality care, irrespective of which healthcare provider they take their child to see. Reducing unnecessary variation improves the overall quality of care and reduces the parental anxiety that inconsistent advice generates.

This Good Practice Points resource is presented alongside a series of Parent Tips (available under "What to do if your child is unwell" on our website: <https://bit.ly/2RETvEB>) that have been developed in partnership with the Healthier Together collaborative partnership of healthcare professionals and parents. Further resources from Healthier Together can be found here: <https://bit.ly/2xXaf2M>

Use these resources with parents to provide clear information on common childhood illnesses, including advice on what 'red-flag' signs to look out for, where to seek help if required, what parents should do to keep their child comfortable, and how long their child's symptoms are likely to last.

It's really important to realise that all the 'normal' infections that can make children and babies really unwell still remain and there is a major risk that parents may delay bringing their child to the attention of a healthcare professional even if they are unwell. Health visitors, GPs and hospitals are still providing support for children. Further information on COVID-19 and children can be found here: <https://bit.ly/2Va9xqQ>

Legal Disclaimer: We have taken every care in the preparation of the content of this Good Practice Point and linked Parent Tips on managing minor illnesses, which are designed and provided for parents and healthcare professionals working in the UK to support parental health literacy when managing common childhood illnesses. Every situation is unique. You must always therefore exercise your own professional judgement; we can accept no responsibility or liability which may arise from the application of this information in individual cases.

More information on page 2

For additional resources see www.ihv.org.uk

The information in this GPP version was created on 27/01/2022.

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Good Practice Points for HVs

- For specific advice on the most common conditions, see our range of Parent Tips:
 - Fever
 - Wheeze and breathing difficulties
 - Diarrhoea and vomiting
 - Rash
 - Head injury
- Do spend time listening to parents about their concerns and talking them through the child's presenting symptoms using the relevant Parent Tip sheet with Red, Amber, Green (RAG) symptom review to support the parent to identify the most appropriate treatment/response.
- Do spend time talking about how the parents might feel, i.e. panicky and stressed, and how they might manage this. They should trust their inner 'alarm bells' and if worried should speak to their GP or NHS 111.
- Do spend time talking through "safety netting" advice, i.e. "These are your child's symptoms now, but if your child deteriorates and you see X,Y,Z signs and symptoms, you will need to seek further advice in accordance with the RAG rating chart".
- If there are questions that you do not feel you can answer, be honest: "I am not a paediatrician and do not know the answer. However, if you are worried about your child take a look at the Healthier Together website for useful info (www.what0-18.nhs.uk) or contact your GP surgery".
- For general advice on babies under 3 months see "What's normal and what's not" available here: <https://bit.ly/3qZS5Xm>

Where should parents seek help?

- Parents should be supported to review their child's symptoms using the Red, Amber, Green rated symptom check in the relevant Parent Tips.
- If it is non-urgent, they can also speak to their local pharmacist and follow self-care advice.
- If a child has any of the Amber or Red features in the symptom check, then parents should be advised to make an urgent appointment to see their GP. For an urgent out-of-hours GP appointment, call NHS 111 or visit <https://111.nhs.uk/>.

- Parents should be advised to only call 999 or go to the nearest A&E department in critical or life-threatening situations.
- Parents can be signposted to **further advice produced by the NHS on specific health conditions** available here: <https://bit.ly/34p5WcU>

Core principles of effective support:

- Parents feel listened to, with their concerns acknowledged and supported.
- Parents feel empowered about whether and when they need to seek the advice of a healthcare professional.
- Parents are clearly signposted to appropriate healthcare services when required.
- At every point of contact, the healthcare practitioner should have a clear understanding of the limits of their own competence and when and where to seek guidance.
- Parents should receive consistent and appropriate advice across the whole healthcare system, which is understood by all healthcare practitioners.
- Effective communication and information sharing between healthcare practitioners and services across the whole healthcare system should be in place.
- Local service should actively listen to the views of parents/carers accessing the service, as well as healthcare professionals. Working together improves healthcare delivery.

More information on page 3

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Healthier Together
Improving the health of children and young people

www.ihv.org.uk

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Further advice produced by the NHS on specific health conditions can be found here: <https://www.nhs.uk/>

Self Care

For wear and tear, minor trips and everything in between.

Self-care

You can treat your child's very minor illnesses and injuries at home.

Some illnesses can be treated in your own home with support and advice from the services listed when required, using the recommended medicines and getting plenty of rest.

Health visitors can provide advice on managing minor illnesses and when/where to seek medical advice.

Sound advice

Children can recover from illness quickly but also can become more poorly quickly: it is important to seek further advice if a child's condition gets worse.

For information on common childhood illnesses, go to [Worried about your child?](#)

A range of safety netting and information sheets on common childhood illnesses are [available here](#).

Local Pharmacist

Pharmacists are experts in many aspects of healthcare and can offer advice on a wide range of long-term conditions and common illnesses such as [coughs](#), [colds](#) and [stomach upsets](#). You don't need an appointment and many have private consultation areas, so they are a good first port of call. Your pharmacist will say if you need further medical attention.

Sound advice

- Visit a [pharmacy](#) if your child is ill, but does not need to see a GP.
- Remember that if your child's condition gets worse, you should seek further medical advice immediately.

GP (General Practitioner)

GPs and the primary care team assess, treat and manage a whole range of health problems. They also provide health education, give vaccinations and carry out simple surgical procedures. Your GP will arrange a referral to a hospital specialist should you need it.

Sound advice

[Doctors/GPs](#) can treat many illnesses that do not warrant a visit to A&E.

NHS 111

NHS 111 can help if you have an urgent medical problem and you're not sure what to do, or which NHS service you need. Get help online or on the phone. To get help from NHS [111](#), you can:

- go to 111.nhs.uk
- call 111

NHS [111](#) is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

You can also use the NHS App which is a simple and secure way to access a range of NHS services on your smartphone or tablet - more information is [available here](#).

Sound advice

Use [NHS 111](#) if you are unsure what to do next, have any questions about a condition or treatment, or require information about local health services.

Accident and Emergency

A&E departments provide vital care for life-threatening emergencies, such as loss of consciousness, suspected heart attacks, breathing difficulties, or severe bleeding that cannot be stopped. If you're not sure it's an emergency, call [111](#) for advice.

Sound advice

- Many visits to [A&E](#) and calls to [999](#) could be resolved by any other NHS services.
- If your condition is not critical, choose another service to get the best possible treatment.

References

- Public Health England, *Health visiting and school nursing service delivery model*, May 2021. Available: <https://bit.ly/3wEspAQ> [accessed 21/01/2022]
- NHS Digital, *Hospital Accident & Emergency Activity 2020-21 Official statistics*, September 2021. Available: <https://bit.ly/3rO1UH5> [accessed 21/01/2022]

Note²: Rates of A&E attendances are influenced by access to services as well as need.

Acknowledgement and thanks

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<https://bit.ly/2xXaf2M>

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