



Back-to-school: More coughs, colds and illnesses

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Healthy Living

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The start of the school year brings learning, sports teams, new friends — and the daily exchange of germs between hundreds of children.

In other words, your kids are going to get sick, quite likely sooner rather than later. And there's not a lot you can do about it. "There is no magic pill out there," said pediatrician Dr. Mohammed Kaashmiri of St. Elizabeth Medical Center's Children's Health Center in Utica. "Kids are going to get their share of colds. And parents should expect, for those entering kindergarten, to get a cold every three to four weeks."

In total, younger kids will probably get six colds a year and two ear infections over the winter, he said.

But that doesn't mean you can't do anything to help your kids through those colds or to protect them from other health problems. Here is some of the latest news on kids' health, as well as some "oldies but goodies" suggested by area doctors that you hope parents will get the message this year:

Cold, flu and fever medicine

If you're breaking out over-the-counter children's medicines leftover from last year's cold and flu season, check the packaging carefully. McNeil Consumer Healthcare has recalled many of their children and infant products, including some market the brand names Tylenol, Motrin, Zyrtec and Benadryl. The products were recalled because they did not meet the comp quality standards, McNeil said, but no children have actually gotten sick from taking the products.

Some of the products may contain a higher concentration of the active ingredient than specified, others may contain inactive ingredients that don't meet internal testing requirements and others may contain tiny particles, according to the Food and Drug Administration, which has urged consumers not to use these products.

For information on which products were recalled or on how to get a refund, go to www.mcneilproductrecall.com

Generic medications are still safe to use as are brand-name products made by other companies.

Of course, the recalls aren't a big deal for the youngest patients with colds and coughs. The latest recommendations suggest that parents not give young children cough and cold medicine.

In 2008, the FDA recommended that cough and cold medicines not be used in children under the age of 2 because of their "serious and potentially life-threatening side effects." Later that year, the Consumer Healthcare Products Association agreed to change the labeling of its members' cold and cough medicines to state that they shouldn't be used for children under four years of age.

Dr. Chris Kjolhede, pediatrician and director of Bassett Healthcare Network's school-based health centers, said the medicines aren't recommended for children younger than 6 and that there's not much data to suggest they're good for older kids. He said he discourages parents from using them and instead tells them to give their kids fluids, blow their noses and give acetaminophen or ibuprofen if the child has a fever.

The problem with cold medicine for kids, said Kaashmiri, is that there have been a few deaths from accidental overdose (because parents accidentally either gave the wrong dose or gave more than one medicine with the same ingredient) and that studies have looked at appropriate dosing for young children.

In fact, he said, there's not enough data to support using these medicines in children at all.

"We spend \$2 billion a year on cold medicine in this country, but there is no study that's ever been done to show that it's more effective than placebos," he said.

Parents who believe a medicine worked because the child got better after taking it are simply mistaken, Kaashmiri said.

"You can take nothing and get better in seven days or you take something and get better in one week," he said.

Earaches

There was a time when doctors automatically prescribed antibiotics for children with earaches. But Kjolhede wants to reassure parents that those days are past.

About 30 percent of earaches are caused by viruses, which don't respond to antibiotics, he said. Of the three bacteria that cause earaches, two of them clear up on their own, meaning that about 70 percent of kids with earaches don't need antibiotics.

just lots of fluids, and acetaminophen or ibuprofen for pain relief, Kjolhede said.

"If the kid is no better or is worse in 48 hours, then we will start on antibiotics," he said.

Prescribing antibiotics when they're not needed can provoke needless allergic reactions and contribute to drug-resistant such as MRSA, Kjolhede said.

RSV

RSV (respiratory syncytial virus) is an extremely common and usually mild virus that causes cold-like symptoms. But it prove serious, even deadly, to babies, especially those who were born pre-term or have certain health conditions such as disease, muscle disease, congenital heart disease or Down syndrome, Kaashmiri said.

"(For) healthy children, RSV should not be any different than other rhinoviruses, which give you colds in the winter mo said. But young babies sometimes have to be hospitalized, although not as often as in the past, he said.

Parents should be on the lookout for a newborn who has trouble breathing and eating at the same time, shows any blue breathes "funny," Kjolhede said.

RSV is a concern for babies younger than 6 months, but especially for babies younger than 28 days, he said.

Pertussis

California is now facing what may turn out to be the largest outbreak of pertussis, also known as whooping cough, in 50 years. The disease has been increasing since the 1980s; part of the reason lies in better testing, according to the CDC.

Although the numbers aren't as serious as in California, Upstate New York has also seen a sharp increase in cases. In the six months of this year, Oneida County had 10 cases, as many as in all of last year, according to Gayle Jones, director of Oneida County Health Department. And many cases may go undiagnosed.

Pertussis can prove life threatening for infants. And infants can't achieve immunity through vaccination because the pe vaccine requires five doses from the age of 2 months through age 4 to 6 for full immunity. And older children and adult: booster shots to keep their immunity active, which is the best way to keep infants safe from the disease.

Vitamin D

It's hard for kids to get enough vitamin D from the sun during an upstate winter. But Kaashmiri doesn't recommend vit supplements. Unlike most vitamins, vitamin D (and A and K) are fat soluble, not water soluble, which means taking too toxic, he said.

If parents make sure kids eat enough fortified dairy products to get sufficient calcium, then they should be getting enou vitamin D, too, he said. (Statistics show most kids don't get enough of either.) The FDA issued a warning in June that p: may accidentally give infants too much vitamin D when liquid supplements come with droppers. The drops are recom for some babies, especially those who are breastfed.

Here's other pediatric health news:

- One manufacturer's version of a vaccine against four types of human papillomavirus that can cause genital warts a cervical cancer has been approved for use in boys and young men ages 9 to 26. The approved version is Gardasil, ma Merck. The vaccine was previously approved for girls and young women and is recommended for them by the Center Disease Control and Prevention. The vaccine would protect boys from genital warts and their female sexual partners cervical cancer.
- All children, not just those with a family history, should be screened for cholesterol, according to a study published i August issue of the journal Pediatrics.
- Too much time spent playing video games can, like too much time spent watching television, lead to attention probl in children, according to another study published in Pediatrics in August. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that kids get no more than two hours of screen time a day.
- Be careful with button batteries. Between 1985 and 2009, the number of children suffering severe health consequen after swallowing button batteries rose 670 percent, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Thirteen of the children died. Two studies, published in Pediatrics in June, found that 61.8 percent of button batteries swallowed by younger than age 6 came from a product, 29.8 percent were loose and 8.2 percent were taken from a package.

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