

# Preventing back-to-school illnesses

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The backpacks are packed, lunchboxes are filled and the little ones are back in school. Kids have returned to their classrooms with stories of their summer vacations, and, unfortunately, with a host of germs ready to spread quickly in a close environment.

Jacqueline Stout-Aguilar, PhD, a registered [nurse](#), assistant professor at the Texas A&M College of Nursing, and former elementary [school](#) nurse, explains the most common back-to-school illnesses with tips to keep your child out of the nurse's office.

## **What should parents look for?**

Unfortunately, the school grounds can be a petri dish for germs. The flu and the common cold are very likely early in the school year, and fever is the telling symptom to keep children at home.

"A fever of 100.4 or higher is the biggest symptom to look for," Stout-Aguilar said. "If your child has a fever, then they could have a viral or bacterial infection and should likely be seen by their primary care provider."

Parents should not rely solely on a giving a fever reducer, as it will only treat the symptom, and not the illness. If children are sick, they must be fever-free for 24 hours without medication, or on provider-prescribed medication for at least 24 hours, before they can go back to school.

"Many parents will see that their child has a fever and give them something over the counter and send them to school," Stout-Aguilar said. "Just because your child's fever went down, it doesn't mean that they're cured. Sending your sick child to school can cause their condition to worsen and can cause the illness to spread throughout the classroom and, eventually, the entire school."

## **How can you keep your child healthy at home?**

There are plenty of ways to keep your children healthy before they even get to school. Children should get nine to 11 hours of sleep each night

and eat a well balanced diet, with plenty of vitamin C, to promote a healthier immune system.

Children should also learn how to cover their coughs and sneezes, with the inside of their elbow or a tissue, and wash their hands properly.

"It is important to wash your hands with soap, warm water and friction," Stout-Aguilar said. "Teaching your children to wash their hands for as long as it takes to sing the alphabet would help kill a lot of germs."

Making sure your child is vaccinated is also very important, and some schools won't allow your children to begin classes until they've received certain required immunizations. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's "Recommended Childhood and Adolescent Immunization Schedule," these are the immunizations that may be due or administered for children who were up-to-date upon entering kindergarten:

- Hepatitis A (HepA) series: If not already vaccinated
- Hepatitis B series: If not already vaccinated
- Measles, mumps, rubella: If not already completed
- Varicella (chickenpox): If not already vaccinated
- Influenza (flu): This vaccine changes every year, so children should get the annual shot
- Tetanus, diphtheria, pertussis (Tdap) booster
- Pneumococcal vaccine: If not already vaccinated
- Meningococcal vaccine: Unvaccinated students entering high school; college freshman living in dormitories

"Getting vaccinated is extremely important," Stout-Aguilar said. "Many of these illnesses can be very serious, and getting vaccinated will keep your children, as well as other [children](#), safe."

## Keeping your child healthy at school

Your child will spend most of their day at school, particularly in [classrooms](#), so it's important to make sure that their workspace is clean.

"It's perfectly fine to provide your child's class with some antibacterial wipes to help kill [germs](#) on their desk or work stations," Stout-Aguilar said. "Bacteria can live on surfaces for as long as two weeks or up to a month."

Children should wash their hands before and after lunch, after using the restroom and when their hands are dirty from the playground or other instances. Many school supply lists now include alcohol-based sanitizer on them, but that shouldn't replace proper hand washing.

A child's immune system is still developing, so their body's defenses are not used to fighting off pathogens that adults have, which can make determining your child's health difficult. If your child seems under-the-weather, Stout-Aguilar recommends trusting your parental instincts.

"You see your [child](#) everyday and know their behavior," Stout-Aguilar said. "When it comes to their health, it's better to err on the side of caution and make an appointment with their primary care provider."

Provided by Texas A&M University

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