

Infection Prevention is Sepsis Prevention in Young Children

Children spend a lot of time at school, during the school day and after for extracurricular activities. Sometimes they get sick or hurt when they're there. Luckily, most of the time, these illnesses or injuries aren't serious. But sometimes they can be. If infections are left untreated or not treated quickly enough, infections can lead to a serious condition called sepsis. Sepsis is a life-threatening emergency that happens when your body's response to an infection damages vital organs and, often, causes death. You may have heard it called "blood poisoning" in the past.

The key to reducing the risk of sepsis is preventing infections or identifying them and treating them as quickly as possible. Children can pick up many kinds of infections, but these are the most common ones at school:

Viral Infections

Elementary schools, especially the early grades, are often called hotspots for viral illnesses, like:

- Influenza (the flu)
- Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV)
- Viral conjunctivitis (pinkeye)
- Fifth disease (often called slapped cheek)

These viruses and others can spread through a classroom quickly. Most clear up on their own with time and some TLC (tender loving care), but some, like the flu and RSV, can become serious and cause complications, such as pneumonia.

Bacterial Infections

Common bacterial infections in schools include impetigo and strep throat. Children can also get infections like MRSA (methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus) if they have an open cut or scrape.

Fungal Infections

Many fungal infections caught at school, like athlete's foot or ringworm, are typically less serious. However, children who have a weakened immune system or a chronic health problem could get very sick from other fungal infections, such as Valley Fever. This infection is caused by a fungus (coccidioides) that grows in the soil in hot, dry climates, like in Arizona, California, and Texas.

Sepsis

Like strokes or heart attacks, sepsis is a life-threatening medical emergency that requires rapid diagnosis and treatment. It can affect anyone at any time. More than 18 children in the U.S. die from sepsis each day. Many children who survive sepsis are left with long-term problems. But sepsis can often be prevented by reducing the risk of infections and treating infections seriously.

Vaccines:

Regular childhood vaccines prevent many illnesses. For example, cases of meningitis – a very serious infection – dropped drastically where the vaccine is now routine. If your child cannot be vaccinated because of an underlying problem, it's important that the people around the child be vaccinated, providing “herd immunity.”

Wound care:

Cleaning all cuts and scrapes with soap and water can help remove bacteria. Antibacterial ointment may also be helpful. Try to keep the wound covered and dry while it's healing.

Hand washing:

Teach your children how to wash their hands properly and often so they can learn to protect themselves.

Your school nurse is probably the most accessible front-line healthcare professional your child has access to during their elementary school years. A school nurse's role is vital to helping keep your child as healthy as possible and managing health issues, should any come up. Remind your child that they can see their school nurse if they aren't feeling well or have any health-related questions.

If your child is sick, watch for signs of sepsis.

Any Child Who:

1. Feels abnormally cold to touch
2. Looks mottled, bluish, or has very pale skin
3. Has a rash that does not fade when you press it
4. Is breathing very fast
5. Has a convulsion
6. Is very lethargic or difficult to wake up

A Child Under 5 Who:

1. Is not eating
2. Is vomiting repeatedly
3. Has not urinated in 12 hours

If you see one or more of these symptoms, your child may be critically ill.

If you suspect sepsis, call 9-1-1 or go to a hospital and tell your medical professional, “I AM CONCERNED ABOUT SEPSIS.”

This educational resource is supported by a grant from the Del E. Webb Foundation.