



Day Care and Ear, Nose, and Throat Problems

Who is in day care?

The 2000 census reported that of among the nation's 19.6 million preschoolers, grandparents took care of 21 percent, 17 percent were cared for by their father (while their mother was employed or in school); 12 percent were in day care centers; nine percent were cared for by other relatives; seven percent were cared for by a family day care provider in their home; and six percent received care in nursery schools or preschools. More than one-third of preschoolers (7.2 million) had no regular child-care arrangement and presumably were under maternal care.

Day care establishments are defined as those primarily engaged in care of infants or children, or in providing pre-kindergarten education, where medical care and/or behavioral correction are not a primary function or major element. Some may or may not have substantial educational programs, and some may care for older children when they are not in school.

What are your child's risks of being exposed to a contagious illness at a day care center?

Medline, a service of the National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health, reports that day care centers do pose some degree of an increased health risk for children, because of the exposure to other children who may be sick.

When your child is in a day care center, the risk is greatest for viral upper respiratory infection (affecting the nose, throat, mouth, voice box) and the common cold, ear infections, and diarrhea. Some studies have tried to link asthma to day care. Other studies suggest that being exposed to all the germs in day care actually **IMPROVES** your child's immune system.

Studies suggest that the average child will get eight to ten colds per year, lasting ten - 14 days each, and occurring primarily in the winter months. This means that if a child gets two colds from March to September, and eight colds from September to March, each lasting two weeks, the child will be sick more than over half of the winter.

At the same time, children in a day care environment, exposed to the exchange of upper respiratory tract viruses every day, are expected to have three to ten episodes of otitis media annually. This is four times the incidence of children staying at home.

When should your child remain at home instead of day care or school?

Simply put, children become sick after being exposed to other sick children. Some guidelines to follow are:

- When your child has a temperature higher than 100 degrees, keep him/her at home. A fever is a sign of potentially contagious infection, even if the child feels fine. Schools often advise keeping the child at home until a fever-free period has existed for 24 hours.
- When other children in the day care facility have a known contagious infection, such as chicken pox, strep throat or conjunctivitis, keep your child at home.
- Children taking antibiotics should be kept at home until they have taken the medicine for one or two days.
- If your child is vomiting or has diarrhea, the young patient should not be around other children. Other signs of illness are an inability to take fluids, weakness or lethargy, sunken eyes, a depressed soft spot on top of infant's head, crying without tears, and dry mouth.

Can you prevent your child from becoming sick at a day care center?

The short answer is no. Exposure to other sick children will increase the likelihood that your child may “catch” the same illness, particularly with the common cold. The primary rule is to keep your own children at home if they are sick. However, you can:

- Teach your child to wash his or her hands before eating and after using the toilet. Infection is spread the most by children putting dirty toys and hands in their mouths, so check your day care's hygiene cleaning practices.
- Have your child examined by a physician before enrollment in a day care center or school. During the examination, the physician will:
 - Look for otitis (inflammation) in the ear. This is an indicator of future ear infections.
 - Review with you any allergies your child may have. This will assist in determining if the diet offered at the day care center may be harmful to your child.
 - Examine the child's tonsils for infection and size. Enlarged tonsils could indicate that your child may not be getting a healthy sleep at night, resulting in a tired condition during the day.
- Alert the day care center manager when your child is ill, and include the nature of the illness.

Day care has become a necessity for millions of families. Monitoring the health of your own child is key to preventing unnecessary sickness. If a serious illness occurs, do not hesitate to have your child examined by a physician.

