

KEEPING YOUR CHILD HEALTHY

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Do you know if your baby is sick or if that fever is just a side effect of teething? How high does a temperature have to be before you run to the doctor? Does your doctor's reluctance to give your child antibiotics mean he doesn't take you or your child's illness seriously?

For every question a parent has about a child's health, there is a standard answer, "It depends." Why is it that the professionals you trust the most seem to hedge their bets between saying "nothing's wrong," and "your child might have the mystery illness of the week?"



The truth is your doctor is relying on you to be the key informant about your child's health. The clearer and more specific you are about what's going on with your child, the more information your pediatrician has to make a diagnosis, prescribe a treatment, or give you advice. You are the front-line defender of your child's well-being.

Fortunately, the vast majority of babies are born blessed with good health. But it's your job, not your pediatrician's, to keep things that way. The best health protection on the planet begins with your dedication to preventing illness and accidents in your child's life.

Here is your **Four-Point Plan** for taking care of your own child's health and making savvy use of the health care system when it's necessary.

1. Get good information on health and safety. Then use it.

Before you bring your baby home, prepare your child's sleep, bath and diaper changing area using the guidelines of the [American Academy of Pediatrics](http://www.aap.org). Before your child can crawl or walk, make your home safe and child-friendly.

Look at a few videos, available through <http://www.parentsaction.org>, on health and safety. Go to a large baby store or one of the many websites on child safety. Select and purchase



safety products based on what is needed in your home and in your car. Most parents purchase car seats, cabinet and drawer latches, table edge covers, outlet covers, finger protectors (for doors), cordless blinds or cord winders, safety gates, and soft floor coverings. You may also need barriers for your stairway banister and fireplace covers.

I know your parents didn't have all this stuff when you grew up. But you have the opportunity and responsibility to create a very safe environment in your home and car. Remember, of all the things that can go wrong, an accident at home is the most likely event to harm your child. Who wants to carry that guilt around when most of the above listed safety products are under \$5.00 each?

2. Practice good hygiene at all times.

Good hygiene and sanitation are the primary preventatives for many common ailments such as diarrhea, which can be life threatening for an infant or toddler. You don't have to sterilize



your surroundings but dirt is not a good thing, except for growing plants.

If the floor is your infant's designated play and roll area, use a soft clean protective covering that you can move from room to room. Don't let anyone walk on that surface with their dirty shoes and, definitely, don't let the dog scoot on it.

Make sure everyone who has contact with a new baby washes their hands before

handling the infant. Your own mother and father will give you a hard time about this; but people will have their dirty fingers in the baby's mouth before they realize it.

Soiled diapers are the germ capital of the nursery, so discard them in a covered container and wash your hands thoroughly after any contact with baby poop. Make sure the ritual of hand washing after using the toilet is one of your children's first good habits. You don't want those germs on their hands either.

Finally, if you have cavities or gum disease, never ever, "sterilize" your child's pacifiers or bottle nipples with your own saliva, or even chew table food to give it to an older infant. You are passing harmful bacteria directly into your child's mouth, which can have an effect on their oral hygiene, even before teething is complete.

3. Adopt good nutrition practices, beginning with feeding your baby breast milk.



Your new baby needs to build up immunities to fight off illness, and that's done best by nursing as long as you possibly can. It's work to nurse and pump, no matter what the lactation specialists, the La Leche League or anyone else may tell you. However, the payoff for nursing is high, especially if you can provide your milk for six months to a year.

The next step is providing a balanced diet on a regular schedule so your child's nutrients are both adequate and spread throughout the day. Resist the temptation of high sugar and high fat content, and most of all, feed your child what he or she needs; *not* what you'd like to eat. If anything, change your diet to mimic what is best for the kids. The day you're afraid to say "no" to a three year old who wants the equivalent of candy for breakfast, is the day you've given up your promise to protect your child (and your health care pocketbook) from harm.

4. Be vigilant about your child's health and wellbeing.

Usually, the first sign of illness is a change in your child's mood or behavior. If a nap doesn't improve things, start tracking bowel movements, urination and temperature. Your pediatrician will want to know how frequently and how much of anything (vomit, urine, bowel output, etc.) has been produced in the previous 24-48 hours.



If you end up at the doctor's office, remember that unless you come armed with information, "it depends" will be a very logical diagnosis. Your next step is to make an effort to understand what the doctor tells you, and to be conscientious about the treatment regimen. Parents often stop medications when the child appears to be well, only to face a recurrence of the illness because they stopped the medicine too soon.

Pre-school children don't have the capacity to know what you should know about health, nutrition, safety, and personal care. If, as a parent, you are ever in doubt about how to best protect your children, keep one idea in mind. Your most important goal is for your children to *be* well, not to get well. Prevention and reducing risks are more important than any medicine you can buy. Remember, *you* are more important than your child's doctor in making sure nothing bad happens.

