The number of children catching measles is rising. To be protected they need to be immunised with the MMR vaccine.

It's never too late to be vaccinated.

For more information contact your local GP surgery or visit: www.nhs.uk/measles
The Rough Guide to Childhood Illnesses
CREDITS AND PUBLISHING INFORMATION

Medical advice
While every care has been taken in researching and compiling the medical information in this book, it is in no way intended to replace or supersede professional medical advice. Neither the author nor the publisher may be held responsible for any action or any claim howsoever resulting from the use of this book or any information contained in it. Readers must obtain their own professional medical advice before relying on or otherwise making use of the medical information contained in this book. The Department of Health have offered advice on the factual information within the immunisation section of this book.

Contact details for organisations and website addresses frequently change: those included in this book were correct at the time of publication.

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The Rough Guide to

CHILDHOOD ILLNESSES
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INTRODUCTION: CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND CHILDHOOD ILLNESSES

We all want our kids to be happy and well, but the reality is that even generally healthy babies and kids will get sick. Viruses and bacteria (germs) are always lurking about. Some childhood illnesses are minor – snuffles and tummy upsets that come and go quickly with no lasting effects. Babies and children who are getting and “fighting off” illnesses are, in a way, training their immune systems to recognise and prepare to fight off the same illnesses in the future. (Although some annoying illnesses can recur even if you’ve done battle with them in the past.) This book, based on the health chapter of the Rough Guide to Babies and Toddlers and supplemented with updated information, will help you understand and treat your child’s illnesses. The experience of kids being sick can range from a few miserable days lurking about in pyjamas and needing lots of cuddles to a scary episode fraught with worry. Knowing how to get the right diagnosis and help with the right treatment can give you peace of mind that you are doing all you can. Everything from the common cold and throwing-up to far more dangerous diseases, such as measles and meningitis, is covered here.

The book also explains how to prevent those more serious illnesses and diseases which used to injure, maim and kill children in the past. Although we don’t often hear of these diseases so much, they are still lurking and we still need the protection for our children that, in some cases, only immunisation can provide. In the UK, families can take advantage of the free immunisation programme available to all babies and kids. You may have heard some debate about whether the MMR immunisation jab causes autism. This book is designed to show you that after all the research that has been done and the re-checking of medical
histories of millions of children who've been immunised with MMR, it's now clear that childhood immunisation injections - MMR included - do not cause autism. All the details on this and other concerns are discussed here so you can decide for yourself how to best look after your family, based on the best possible information available.

I know I feel better now that my family is fully immunised. It won't stop every illness, or the irregular sniffles, or the occasional day when everyone stays in their pyjamas and stares into the bottom of the "sick bowl". But it means that as a mum, I don't have to worry about most of the really scary stuff, because we've done everything we can to be protected.

Kaz Cooke
PART 1

Getting ill
PART 1: GETTING ILL

WHEN CHILDREN GET SICK

The first six to twelve months of major contact with other kids (siblings or kids at childcare, nursery or school) means it’s a germ free-for-all. This is one of the reasons it’s so hard for a parent to work outside the home during the child’s early years, even if it’s part time. Luckily, very few of the things kids are developing immunity against are going to kill them, especially in the UK, where our hospital staff are all generally wonderful and, until recently, we have had universal immunisation (see Part 2 on immunisation). Kids usually get ill suddenly, although after a while you might be able to recognise when they’re “fighting off something”.

When a kid gets ill their immune system works to develop future protection including developing antibodies (proteins in the blood which fight off invader illnesses). Healthy kids can pick up a minor viral infection, which they fight off without treatment, every couple of months (a head cold, being quiet and “off-colour” – meaning paler – or

THE IMMUNE SYSTEM

The immune system recognises and repels many viruses and bacteria you’ve had before, preventing you from getting sick again. Having an immune system in good shape helps kids recover more quickly. But even the best immune system won’t stop all germs or prevent all illnesses.

Good health boosters:

★ breastfeeding
★ fresh air
★ exercise

★ enough protein and carbohydrates
★ being calm and happy
★ fruit and veg
an unidentified rash might be clues). As well as that there are minor sniffles and assorted “tummy bugs” that kids tend to pick up and get rid of over a day or so here and there. If your kid has a chronic or very serious illness, make sure you get all the medical opinions you can and insist on seeing a specialist with the widest possible experience in the area.

**What causes illnesses?**

Childhood illnesses are usually caused by a virus or bacteria, which are both germs. Viruses are “bugs” that need to live and multiply in cells to survive, so they live in us and reproduce themselves by being passed on to other people, who then get ill and pass them on, and so it goes. Bacteria are little organisms that can live and grow independently (such as germs on a loo seat), with the side effect of infecting people.

**When are illnesses contagious?**

Illnesses are usually most contagious when the germs are multiplying the fastest. This often happens when you first “catch a bug”, before any symptoms appear, and in the first few days of symptoms. Sneezing, vomiting and diarrhoea are really efficient ways of spreading the germs, so while these symptoms continue, whatever the stage of the illness, the bug is probably still contagious. It usually takes three to five days for the incubation of a common cold, meaning from catching it to the start of symptoms. Despite the fact that parents often say “It’s not contagious any more”, they’re often just guessing.

**Should kids go back to playgroup, childcare or nursery?**

Childcare centres usually say kids with a tummy bug should be kept home until 24 hours after their last vomit or bout of diarrhoea.

Kids should be kept home from group care while they continue to have symptoms of an illness and until they’re feeling bouncy again – not only because the bug is still contagious, although that’s
WHEN TO CALL AN AMBULANCE FOR A CHILD WITH AN ILLNESS

Ring the general emergency number: 999

Call an ambulance if your child:

★ has a convulsion (a fit).
★ has difficulty with or stops breathing.
★ can’t be roused.
★ if they have this combination of symptoms: fever, repeated vomiting, a stiff neck, their eyes are sensitive to light, and they have a spotty rash that starts as red but turns purple and doesn’t fade when you press it (these are signs of septicaemia and meningitis), then you need to get your child to a hospital straight away — so call an ambulance if you’re too stressed to drive safely.

a big issue, especially with more serious illnesses, but because kids with symptoms are almost always below par or even miserable. It’s harder for them to get one-on-one care in a childcare centre, even though I know staff do their very best. It isn’t fair to the child, and they want to be at home with a parent. Many parents who work outside the home eat up their own annual leave allowance (if they have one) looking after their kids.

When to see a doctor about an illness

Keep the phone number of your GP’s surgery near the phone. If the surgery is closed a recorded message should give you the number of your local out-of-hours service, which you can ring for a telephone consultation with a doctor. They may do a home visit, but if they think the problem is really serious they will probably tell you to get to your nearest hospital. My cousin Suze, a paramedic, says “as well as getting better quickly, kids can often deteriorate quickly”. She says parents need to keep a careful eye on an ill kid: “It’s always
suspicious if a child is quieter than usual. It's generally better to have a screaming one than a quiet one."

See or contact a doctor in any of the following situations:

- Your kid has been in contact with an infectious disease they haven't been immunised against (see Part 2 for details).
- Fever is accompanied by worrying symptoms such as misery, listlessness, repeated vomiting or an inexplicable rash (see also "When to call an ambulance for a child with an illness", opposite).
- You're worried because your child seems somehow "not right", too quiet, uninterested in anything or "floppy".
- Your child develops wheezing.
- There's unexplained crying that isn't helped by the usual methods, especially in kids who can't tell you what's wrong.

You know your child best so take your own uneasy feelings seriously. All parents have these: some call them "instincts" and act on them, others mistrust them and are unsure whether they're worrying unnecessarily, but they're the same feelings so start calling yours instincts. The only way to check them out is to take your child to a doctor. Even if nothing is revealed, keep on trusting your instincts – you may need to try another doctor or the kid may have just beaten a bug.

Sometimes the only symptom of a kid's illness is listlessness, whingeing and a pressing need to be right next to mum or dad, or at least in the same room. A nurse I know always tested her post-toddler-age children by asking them to jump three times – if they couldn't, she knew they were really sick and not faking it. Kids under 5 are not likely to fake being sick unless it's learned behaviour (they can often suddenly say they have a sore back if you have one, for