

Avoiding the Flu: What You And Your Family Can Do

Dec. 14 (The Providence Journal) Water, water everywhere. Water in all its forms has plenty of jobs in the winter. "Drink plenty of fluids." "Wash your hands." "Use a vaporizer with a cold." "Eat soup for the flu." Another score for drinking plenty of water: Kids not drinking enough water and eating too much is adding up to more cases of kids with kidney stones.

In a time when so much health news is changing, there's still the tried and true: "Washing your hands frequently and consistently is the single most important action you can take to stay well during flu season," says Dr. Charlotte Cowan, a pediatrician and author of *The Little Elephant with the Big Earache* (Hippocratic Press, \$17.96, 2004), a book in a health series called Dr. Hippo.

Teach your children to wash their hands after they blow their noses, before they eat and after they use the bathroom. They also need to wash their hands and faces after they have been at school or out and about.

Another tip: To help stop the spread of germs, if you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve, not your hands. Another lesson for kids.

Among big changes: The flu vaccine is now targeting the entire school-age population. And over-the-counter cold medicine may not do any good for children under age 4.

Drug companies recently voluntarily announced a warning to parents that children under 4 should not be given over-the-counter cough and cold remedies. Last year, the age was 2 -- a mandatory change because of possible severe side effects and a lack of evidence that they work.

As cold medicines continue to be evaluated, Dr. Martin Belson, a pediatric emergency physician, advises parents and caregivers:

- Do not give adult medicines to a child.
- Do not give two or more medicines with the same ingredients at the same time.
- Do not give antihistamines to make a child sleepy.

Also, parents should give the exact recommended dose of cough medicine; use the measuring device that comes with the medicine; and keep over-the-counter medicines out of sight and out of reach, says Belson. For more information, his Web site is www.kidemergencies.com.

So what are parents to do to ease cold symptoms for their little ones? From www.askdrsears.com, the pediatricians suggestions include:

- Run a hot steam vaporizer
- Flush stuffy noses with saline
- Prop kids slightly upright to sleep better
- Drink plenty of fluids

- Eat chicken soup or hot broths
- Include fruits and vegetables in daily diet

The American Academy of Pediatrics and the Centers for Disease Control have broadened the recommended age range for when kids should get the flu vaccine. Children 6 months old to 18 years old should be given flu shots. The guideline had been aged 6 months to about age 5. The flu vaccine is not approved for children younger than 6 months. The AAP also recommends that anyone who lives or works with children younger than 5 should get a shot, mainly to protect the children.

As with treating a cold, rest, liquids and over-the-counter medicine like ibuprofen can help your child feel better. Children should not be given aspirin for flu symptoms.

What health-care providers want you to do before you call in about your sick child, gather a straight story line. If a kid goes from day care to grandma's and then home, it's tough to keep track of fevers, face color and pain-relievers, but that's vital for the best health care. Caregivers need to be able to recognize and convey symptoms over the phone, Belson says, and may not need an office appointment. Some illnesses simply have to run their course: no antibiotics, no cold medicine.

Objective observations give health-care providers a better sense of what's going on, Belson says. How does your child look? How long has this been going on? What's his actual temperature not just a feeling on his forehead?