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## How sick is too sick for school? When should kids stay home?

Do you have a child who's not well? Should your child go to school or not? Here is expert advice.

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WebMD Feature

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Mum, I don't feel well can I miss school today? What parent hasn't heard that question a few times? But when is a [child](#) too sick for school?

Usually as a parent you can tell if there's something physically wrong or if your child doesn't want to go to school for another non medical reason.

If your child seems fine at weekends but often claims to be ill on a Sunday night or Monday morning there may be other issues that need addressing, such as trouble at school, like bullying or friendship problems. It may be that they are tired rather than sick. Children, especially teens, can be on mobile phones or laptops till the early hours if they have access to them in their rooms at night. They may feign illness when they are just shattered.

### Common sense approach

If your child is experiencing real symptoms of illness you can usually make a common sense judgement call on whether they should stay home, stay off school, or go and see a GP. What action you take as a parent depends on the actual symptoms and their severity.

If you work it can be problematic taking a day off to look after an ill child, but ask yourself if you'd stay at home with the same symptoms. If so the same should go for your child.

If your child won't be able to take part fully in lessons and school activities they should stay home. Also you have a responsibility to make sure your child doesn't spread certain illnesses and conditions to other children and school staff.

### So which symptoms require time off school?

**Mild cold symptoms** - We're talking a few sniffles, a slight [cough](#) and a runny nose. If there's no raised temperature and your child feels well enough, there's no reason for them to miss school. Make sure your child knows to cover their nose and mouth with a tissue when coughing or sneezing, dispose of it properly and wash their hands afterwards.

**Bad cough and cold symptoms** - If your child has a bad cough with or without severe cold symptoms they may need to stay off school and perhaps see their [GP](#). It may just be a bad cold but it could possibly be something more serious like [flu](#), [bronchitis](#), or even [pneumonia](#). A child with a raised temperature shouldn't go to school.

**Sore throat** - A [sore throat](#) by itself shouldn't stop a child from going to school if they feel well enough otherwise. If they have a raised temperature of 38C (100.4F) as well they should stay at home. Sore throats can be caused by viruses or bacteria. For most viruses a child's temperature should be normal for 24 hours (without medicine) before they return to school.

### So which symptoms require time off school? continued...

**Whooping cough** - This is a contagious bacterial infection of the [lungs](#) and airways. Babies are usually vaccinated against so it is rare in school-age children. If your child contracts it, you should keep them off school for 5 days from starting antibiotic treatment if this has been prescribed, or 21 days from the start of illness if no [antibiotics](#) are taken, according to guidelines from Public Health England.

**Flu symptoms** - If your child has symptoms which are similar to severe cold symptoms accompanied by a raised temperature of 38C (100.4F) or higher and a general feeling of weakness and aches and pains they may have a viral infection like flu. Keep your child off school and encourage them to rest and drink lots of fluids. Public Health England recommends keeping them at home until they have fully recovered. They will usually feel better within a week.

**Headaches** - A slight [headache](#) shouldn't usually keep a child off school. If headaches happen frequently or there are other symptoms too, like drowsiness or a raised temperature, keep them at home and consult your GP.

**Diarrhoea** - This is quite common in children and is usually a symptom of an infection caused by a virus. It may be accompanied by [vomiting](#). Keep your child off school until they have recovered from their illness and for 48 hours after their last episode of diarrhoea. Make sure they drink lots of fluids and don't become dehydrated.

**Vomiting** - The same goes for vomiting, your child should stay at home until they have recovered from their illness and for 4 hours after they last vomited. Most viruses that cause vomiting get better without treatment within a few days.

**Skin rashes and infections** - Children with skin [rashes](#) should be assumed to be infectious and assessed by a doctor to identify the cause and formulate a treatment plan.

Some infections may pose a risk to vulnerable children at the school or to female school staff who may be [pregnant](#), so make sure the school is aware of your child's condition.

**Chickenpox** - If your child has [chickenpox](#) they should stay off school until all of the spots have crusted over. Ensure they stay away from public areas as well, and from people who might be vulnerable to infectious complications, such as [newborn](#) babies, pregnant women and people with weakened immunity.

**Slapped cheek syndrome** - otherwise known as fifth disease or parvovirus B19, slapped cheek syndrome is a viral infection which is most common in children. Symptoms include bright red cheeks. Children may feel unwell and off colour before the rash develops. It usually clears up by itself within a week to 3 weeks and by the time the rash comes out it's no longer contagious, so it's fine for your child to be at school if they are feeling ok otherwise.

### So which symptoms require time off school? continued...

**German measles, measles and mumps** are rare these days because babies and children are generally immunised, but if your child contracts them they should be kept off school for 4 days from the onset of the rash or 5 days from the onset of swelling in the case of mumps. Again, try to make sure your child does not come into contact with babies, pregnant women or vulnerable children.

**Cold sores and impetigo** - You don't need to keep your child off school if they have cold sores. Just give the appropriate treatment and make sure they don't share drinking bottles or cutlery with other kids. With impetigo keep your child off school until the lesions are crusted and healed or 48 hours after starting antibiotics.

**Conjunctivitis** - Sore red eyes often signify a case of [conjunctivitis](#) which is highly contagious. It's mainly caused by a virus but can be bacterial. Your GP will assess and recommend treatment but Public Health England says there's no need to keep child off school unless an outbreak or cluster occurs.

### What do teachers think?

It can be hard for working parents to take time off to care for their children if their employers aren't sympathetic. There's anecdotal evidence of parents knowingly sending an ill child to school so that the school nurse will then call their work to get them to come and pick up their child, so that their boss can't refuse.

"There are occasions when parents send children to school when they are sick, and this can be for a variety of reasons, including financial pressures. It doesn't mean that they don't care," says Deborah Lawson general secretary of Voice - the union for education professionals, an independent union for teachers, head teachers and education and early years staff.

She adds: "However, teachers and support staff have difficult and demanding jobs, providing the best possible teaching and learning experiences for children in their classes, and they are not in a position to provide the care and additional support needed for children who are sick and would be better cared for at home."

Deborah says: "We would urge parents to follow appropriate medical advice and guidance and not to bring children into school if they are ill or have an infectious disease, and to keep them at home for the recommended period until symptoms have passed. This is important not only for the child's welfare, but also to avoid spreading infection to other children and school staff and the wider community."

#### Further reading:

[Cold & flu treatment slideshow: Medication and home remedies for children](#)  
[Hand washing: The dirtiest places kids will find slideshow](#)  
[Tips for handling allergies at school](#)  
[How to turn the school run into a stroll](#)  
[Eight skills your child should have before starting school](#)  
[Children sometimes need to break the rules](#)  
[First day at school](#)  
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#### View Article Sources

##### SOURCES:

Public Health England Guidelines on Infection Controls in Schools and other childcare settings  
 Deborah Lawson, general secretary of Voice  
 NHS Choices: Slapped Cheek Syndrome, Flu