

BETTER HEALTH FOR BABY

10 steps to improving your child's immunity

HEALTH SERIES | ISSUE 04



EDITOR'S LETTER

As the saying goes, prevention is better than cure. From vitamins to vaccines, we bring you the low-down on how to boost your child's immunity and keep your precious one free from nasty infections and dangerous diseases.

We've split this guide into three sections – infants, toddlers, and general tips for older kids – to make it easy for parents to find the section that suits them best.

But don't forget, what's good for the goose is also good for the gander. The last section includes tips on how to boost your child's general health and immunity – and these tips are also great for you, as parents too.

Healthy living starts at home, and the best way a child learns healthy habits is if his parents set a good example for him to follow.

Salud!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Virginia Chan', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Virginia Chan

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IMMUNITY 101



Find out why your child gets sick and what to do about it.

Some months, it seems as if your kids are simply just taking turns to get sick. If one is recovering from a cough, then it's the other who seems to be coming down with the flu. In between all the hot honey-and-lemon drinks, you might find yourself wondering why kids seem to get sick so often!

The human immune system is made up of specialised cells, tissues and

organs that are able to recognise viruses, bacteria and parasites as foreign to the body. As it turns out, children are more susceptible to infection because their immune systems are still developing.

When should we see a doctor?

If your child is still an infant (less than a year old), Dr Tay recommends that you take him to see a doctor for medication even for minor coughs and colds. Over-the-counter medication is not recommended.

If your child is more than a year old, see a doctor if he has one of the following signs:

- High fever of more than 38.5C
- Persistent pain and crying
- Signs of dehydration (decrease in urine and tears)
- Poor feeding, along with diarrhoea and vomiting
- Breathlessness or irritability



When should we go to the ER?

You should head to the emergency room of any hospital if any of your child's symptoms worsen, or if your child remains unwell despite treatment, especially if your child is still young. Any significant trauma, especially a head injury that results in decreased or abnormal movement of the limbs or is associated with nausea and vomiting, or loss of consciousness, needs urgent medical attention.

BABY BE WELL

Your little bundle of joy needs extra care in order to stay healthy.

Tip #1: Breast is best

Breastmilk really is a superfood for babies. According to Dr Ellen Tay, breast milk contains substances such as antibodies, immune factors and enzymes that protect the child against various diseases and infections. Keep breastfeeding even if you have a mild infection, such as a cough or cold, as your body produces antibodies, which will protect your babies from the infection.

Breastfeeding benefits include reduced rates of infection and disease, a lower incidence of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), as well as a lower chance of dental problems, diabetes and obesity.

Tip #2: Get vaccinated

Vaccines teach the immune system by mimicking a natural infection, explains Dr Tay. So when the body actually meets the virus or bacteria, it can respond and fight the infection

Immunisation Chart

Age	Vaccine	Immunisation against
Birth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BCG • Hepatitis B - 1st dose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tuberculosis • Hepatitis B
1 Month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hepatitis B - 2nd dose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hepatitis B
3 Months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DTaP - 1st dose • Oral Polio - 1st dose • Pneumococcal Conjugate - 1st dose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diphtheria, Pertussis & Tetanus • Poliovirus • Pneumococcal Disease
4 Months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DTaP - 2nd dose • Oral Polio - 2nd dose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diphtheria, Pertussis & Tetanus • Poliovirus
5 Months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hepatitis B - 3rd dose • DTaP - 3rd dose • Oral Polio - 3rd dose • Pneumococcal Conjugate - 2nd dose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hepatitis B • Diphtheria, Pertussis & Tetanus • Poliovirus • Pneumococcal Disease
5-6 Months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hepatitis B - 3rd dose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hepatitis B
12 Months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MMR - Primary dose • Pneumococcal Conjugate - 1st booster 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measles, Mumps & Rubella • Pneumococcal Disease
15-18 Months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MMR - 2nd dose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Measles, Mumps & Rubella
18 Months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DTaP - 1st booster • Oral Polio - 1st booster • MMR - 2nd dose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diphtheria, Pertussis & Tetanus • Poliovirus
6-7 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oral Polio - 2nd booster 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poliovirus
10-11 years	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tdap - 2nd booster • Oral Polio - 3rd booster 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tetanus toxoid, reduced diphtheria toxoid and acellular pertussis • Poliovirus

Based on Age of the Child- Revised in December 2011, Source: HPB

– hence, a vaccinated child would not fall sick with the infection itself.

Vaccinations are an important step in improving your child's immunity towards dangerous viruses and

bacteria with serious or life-threatening complications. Most doctors in Singapore follow the immunisation schedule recommended by the Ministry of Health.

Dr Tay also recommends travel vaccinations if you plan to take your child on holiday or if you are relocating to another country. Consult your paediatrician early for further advice.

Tip #3: Stub it out

The worst thing you can do to baby's delicate lungs is to expose him to second-hand or even third-hand smoke. Exposure to second-hand smoke causes an increased risk of SIDS in infancy, increased risk

of allergies and asthma, increased incidence of Crohn's Disease, and increased incidence of learning difficulties and developmental delays.

The term "third-hand smoke" is a relatively new phrase that describes the chemical contaminants from cigarette smoke that remain in the air and the environment after the cigarette has been extinguished, says Dr Tay. These chemicals can linger for a long time on clothing or carpets and can be reabsorbed



into the body if inhaled or ingested. Research has shown that this can be harmful to children, because they can touch these contaminated surfaces or come into contact with these carpets as they crawl around.

About the doctor

Dr Ellen Tay is a paediatrician practicing at Thomson Paediatric Centre. She obtained a Masters of Medicine in Paediatrics and Membership to the Royal College of Physicians (United Kingdom) in 2002, and completed her specialty training in paediatrics in 2005 (Specialist Accreditation Board, Singapore). Her special interest is sleep behavioural disorder in children and she has authored two book chapters in *Sleep Medicine: A Clinical Guide to Common Sleep Disorders*.

THE NOT-SO-TERRIBLE 2S AND 3S

As your little one starts to walk and talk, it's time to take a few new precautions.

Tip #4: Eat your fruits and vegetables

Nutrition is very important when it comes to childhood immunity, says Dr Liew Woei Kang. An unbalanced diet can result in vitamin and mineral deficiencies, so make sure your kid gets enough fruit and vegetables. If you have a picky toddler, try supplementing his diet with multi-vitamins and minerals.

If your child seems to be falling sick very often, try improving his immunity by adding natural anti-oxidants to his diet. Popular foods that can deliver an anti-oxidant boost include garlic, Vitamin C and Echinacea.



Tip #5: Wash those hands

At this age, your toddler is increasingly curious about the world around him. Your little one might be quite the explorer – he might pick up strange things or even put things into his mouth. Not only should you stop him from putting dirty things into his mouth, another way to stop the spread of germs is to start inculcating a good habit of hand washing.

Some germs spread via the oro-faecal route, says Dr Liew, and those can be eradicated by thorough hand washing with soap and water. If you're out and about

and don't have access to a sink or bathroom, try using a kid-safe hand sanitizer or baby wipes instead.

Tip #6: Practise food safety

While diarrhoea, another common childhood ailment, can cause your child short-term distress, it normally doesn't have a long-term impact.

Prevent food-borne diseases such as salmonella and E coli by ensuring your child eats only fully-cooked meals. If he does fall sick, be sure to complete the course of antibiotics if any are prescribed.

While keeping your child away from dangerous germs can help them avoid illness and infection, don't go overboard. Maintain cleanliness only to a sensible degree, advises Dr Liew, as too clean a living environment is thought to cause our immune system to become a more "allergic" one.

About the doctor

Dr Liew Woei Kang is a paediatrician with a special interest in allergy and immunology, practicing at SBCC Baby & Child Clinic (Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre). He became member of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (United Kingdom) in 2003 and received advanced training in Paediatric Allergy and Immunology at the Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, Australia in 2007. Dr Liew is a strong advocate of patient education and is the President of the Asthma and Allergy Association.

HEALTHY HABITS



As time goes by, here are more tips on how to help keep both child and parent happy and healthy.

Tip #7: Regular exercise

Not only will regular amounts of moderate exercise boost your child's fitness and well-being, it can also improve his immunity. According to Dr Zainal Muttakin, the more physically fit and active you are, the less likely you are to suffer colds.

Exercise also helps to reduce the stress hormones in your blood (read on to Tip #10 to find out why stress is bad). Doctors recommend that children to spend at least an hour a day doing some form of moderately strenuous activity, so take some time to take your child to the playground to run around and have fun!

Tip #8: Adequate rest

Another important immunity booster is simply ensuring that your child is getting enough sleep. Sleep deprivation has been shown to impair immune functions and increase susceptibility to infections such as flu, says Dr Zainal. Sleep is crucial for a growing child's mental and physical development, and insufficient sleep can lead to poor concentration and less-than-optimal physical performance.



To help your child get the rest he needs, psychologists suggest setting up a good sleep schedule and sticking with it. Develop a fun (but not overly stimulating) bedtime routine to help get your kid into "sleep mode". If your child has trouble getting to sleep, help him learn to self-soothe by giving him a stuffed animal or blanket to comfort him.

Tip #9: Avoid stress

Both physical and mental stress can adversely impact your child's immunity, especially if the stress is excessive and not managed positively, says Dr Zainal. "Stress causes the release of a stress hormone called cortisol, a natural steroid hormone, into the blood. It is well-known that cortisol can impair one's ability to fight off infections, especially if present in high doses and for prolonged periods," he adds.

Tips #7 and #8 both help manage stress. Dr Zainal advises that your child should get an adequate amount of rest and sleep, balanced by a healthy amount of outdoor physical activity. The importance of a well-balanced diet, with a good variety of colourful fruits and vegetables, cannot be overemphasized.

To help your older child deal with stress, teach him stress-management techniques (such as time management) as well as relaxation techniques. But underpinning all these anti-stress habits, says Dr Zainal, is a parental support system.



Tip #10: The answer isn't always antibiotics

As a parent who loves your child, it's only normal to want only the best for him. Yet for many common childhood illnesses, especially viral ones, the best treatment is

sometimes simply doing nothing. Your doctor may be able to offer some symptomatic relief (for fever, aches or a runny nose, for example) but remember that antibiotics are not always the answer.

“Antibiotics are ineffective against the common cold as common colds are caused by viruses and not bacteria,” says Dr Zainal.

“Inappropriate use of antibiotics may result in the emergence of multi-drug resistant (MDR) strains of bacteria such as MRSA. These bacteria are resistant to multiple

types of antibiotics and are therefore much harder to eradicate and may require newer and stronger antibiotics to treat.”

If your child needs a course of antibiotics, don't forget to complete the entire course. Prematurely stopping the course of the antibiotics when patients feel better may also promote the emergence of MDR bacteria, warns Dr Zainal. For a more complete discussion on this topic, visit www.mayoclinic.com/health/antibiotics/FL00075.

Immune boosters – Myth or Fact?

There is a great deal of research and discussion on the use of immune boosters such as DHA, probiotics, multivitamins, transfer factor etc in enhancing the immune system. But according to Dr Zainal, it is still not clear how their use would benefit the general population by promoting a stronger immune system and reducing the risk of infections, whether over a short- or long-term period.

“The jury is still out as to whether the use of immune boosters should be recommended as a daily supplement. While these immune boosters may offer some benefit, they do not replace the role of exercise, good nutrition, adequate sleep and stress reduction to maintain your immune system in tip-top condition,” says Dr Zainal.

About the doctor

Dr Zainal Muttakin AR is a paediatrician practicing at SBCC Baby & Child Clinic (Rivervale Plaza). He completed his specialty training in 2001, with special interests in paediatric infectious diseases and vaccines. Prior to joining SBCC, Dr Zainal was an associate consultant in the Paediatric Infectious Diseases Service of KK Women's and Children's Hospital. He is an advocate of active parenting and breastfeeding. He is also passionate about parent education, as he believes that a well-informed parent is a better caregiver to a sick child.

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