

Incubation and Contagious Periods of Infections

Young children are afflicted with infectious diseases 10 to 15 times per year. The attack rate decreases with age because with each new infection we build up antibodies against future ones.

What is an incubation period?

The incubation period is defined as the time between exposure to a contagious disease and the onset of symptoms. This information should help answer the questions, "When will my child come down with it?" and, "Should we cancel our weekend plans?"

If the outer time limit of the incubation period passes and your child is still well, he has probably escaped that infection for now (or has previous antibodies against it).

What is the contagious period?

The contagious period is defined as that amount of time during which a sick child's disease is contagious to others. Knowing this helps answer the question, "How long does my child have to stay home from school or day care?"

For major illnesses (such as hepatitis), a child will need to remain in isolation at home or in the hospital until all chance of spread has passed. For minor illnesses (like the common cold) the guidelines are less strict. Most physicians would agree that a child should stay home at least until he feels well enough to return to school, and the fever has been gone for 12 hours.

What infections are not contagious?

Try not to become preoccupied with infections. Some of the more serious ones are not even contagious. Some infections are due to blockage of a passageway followed by an overgrowth of bacteria. Examples of these are ear infections, sinus infections, and urinary tract infections. Lymph node and bloodstream infections are also rarely contagious. Pneumonia is a complication of a viral respiratory infection in most cases and is usually not contagious. While exposure to meningitis requires consultation with your child's physician, most children exposed to this disease do not become infected. Venereal (genital) diseases are usually non-contagious unless there is sexual contact or shared bathing arrangements.

What are the guidelines for the common contagious infections?

Disease	Incubation	Disease Period (days)	Contagious Period
Skin Infections			
Chickenpox	10 to 21	5 days before rash	until all sores have crusts (5-7 days)
Fifth disease	4 to 14	7 days before rash	(Erythema infectiosum) until rash begins
Hand, foot, and mouth	3 to 6	Onset of mouth ulcers disease	until fever is gone
Impetigo (strep or staph)	2 to 5	Onset of sores	until 24 hours on antibiotic
Lice	7	Onset of itch	until one treatment
Measles	8 to 12	4 days before	until 5 days after rash appears
Rubella (German measles)	14 to 21	7 days before	until 5 days after rash appears
Scabies	30 to 45	Onset of rash	until one treatment
Scarlet fever	3 to 6	Onset of fever or rash	until 24 hours on antibiotic
Shingles	14 to 16	Onset of rash	until all sores have crusts (7 days) (Note: No need to isolate if sores can be kept covered.)
Warts	30 to 180	See footnote A	
Respiratory Infections			
Bronchitis	4 to 6	Onset of cough	until 7 days
Colds	2 to 5	Onset of runny nose	until fever is gone
Cold sores (herpes)	2 to 12	See footnote B	
Coughs (viral)	2 to 5	Onset of cough	until fever is gone
Croup (viral)	2 to 6	Onset of cough	until fever is gone
Diphtheria	2 to 5	Onset of sore throat	until 4 days on antibiotic
Influenza	1 to 2	Onset of symptoms	until fever is gone
Sore throat, strep	2 to 5	Onset of sore throat	until 24 hours on antibiotic
Sore throat, viral	2 to 5	Onset of sore throat	until fever is gone
Tuberculosis	6 to 24		until 2 weeks on month's drugs (Note: Most childhood TB is not contagious.)
Whooping cough	7 to 10	Onset of runny nose	until 5 days on antibiotic
Intestinal Infections			
Diarrhea, bacterial	1 to 5	See footnote C	
Diarrhea, giardia	7 to 28	See footnote C	
Diarrhea, traveller's	1 to 6	See footnote C	
Diarrhea, viral (Rotavirus)	1 to 3	See footnote C	
Hepatitis A	14 to 50	2 weeks before	until 1 week after jaundice begins

Pinworms	21 to 28	See footnote A	
Vomiting, viral	2 to 5		Until vomiting stops
Other Infections			
Infectious mononucleosis	30 to 50	Onset of fever	until fever is gone (7 days)
Meningitis, bacterial	2 to 10	7 days before symptoms	until 24 hours on IV antibiotics in hospital
Mumps	12 to 25	5 days before swelling	until swelling gone (7 days)
Pinkeye without pus	1 to 5	See footnote A (viral)	
Pinkeye with pus	2 to 7	Onset of pus	until (bacterial) 1 day on antibiotic eye drops

Footnotes

(A) Staying home is unnecessary because the infection is very mild and/or minimally contagious.

(B) Cold sores

- Under age 6 years: Your child should stay home until the sores are dry (4 to 5 days). However, if the sores are on a part of the body that can be covered, your child does not need to stay home.
- Over age 6 years: Your child does not need to stay home if he is beyond the touching, picking stage.

(C) Diarrhoeas

- Not toilet trained: Your child should stay home until stools are formed.
- Toilet trained: Your child should stay home until the fever is gone, diarrhoea is mild, blood and mucus are gone, and your child has control over loose bowel movements.
- Consult your day care provider about attendance restrictions.

INFECTION

A disease, illness, or state that occurs when germs enters the body.

FEVER

A rise in body temperature above normal. "Normal" depends on how you measure your child's body temperature. If you measure by rectum (bum) or by ear, fever means a temperature over 38°C (100.4°F). If you measure by mouth, fever means a temperature over 37.5°C (99.5°F). If you measure in the armpit, fever means a temperature over 37.3°C (99.1°F).

MUCUS

A slimy, protective substance secreted by the mucous membranes.

BOWEL

Intestine. Consists of the small and large intestines.