TO: All Principals, for sharing with parents, guardians and staff

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RE: Back to school health advice from the HSE

DATE: 27 August 2024

Back to school health advice from the HSE

As the new school year begins, it is a busy time for families as we get into a routine and get ready for the months ahead.

To try to make it a little easier, the following outlines our back to school health advice to prepare for the school year.

Your child may be feeling worried or anxious around this time. Some children may be finding it difficult to go to sleep at an earlier bedtime. As the school year progresses, most children will end up picking up common viral infectious illnesses such as colds. You can find tips on dealing with these situations below.

1. Ease anxieties and worries
Check in with your child about how they are feeling about school. It's normal for children to feel worried or anxious around this time.

Help your child to understand that anxiety is normal, everyone has it, even you. Tell them there are ways we can manage worry and deal with the things we fear together.

For example, talking with an adult they trust, such as a parent or teacher, and reminding your child of their strength and how they overcame fears in the past. Reading books about school and trying to have some extra one-on-one time with a child who is struggling can all help too.

2. Get bedtime back
Getting enough sleep is important for children's health and development. Try to ensure bedtime is early enough to allow for a good night's sleep. You may need to do this gradually to help your child adjust to an earlier bedtime. Anticipate that your child may be tired and out of sorts for the first weeks as they adjust. Try to be patient.

3. If your child is unwell, keep them home
Many children might have a runny nose or a slight cough as the seasons change. However, if a child is **feeling unwell** they should be at home. For example, if your child:

- has a fever (a temperature of 38 degrees higher)
- is low in energy
- has diarrhoea or vomiting
- cough and sore throat

They should stay at home until those symptoms have finished. Children unwell with symptoms of one infection are more likely to get infected with another infection too, which

might make them more unwell. Staying home when unwell will help prevent the spread of viruses to other children, families and staff.

Here is a useful graphic which tells you how long children should stay home across a number of different illnesses – 'HPSC: When your child should return to school'.

Prepare in advance for how you would manage if your child has to stay at home. Check to see if you have essentials – children's paracetamol, ibuprofen, thermometer etc.

4. Remind kids of the basics
- Cover coughs and sneezes
- Keep hands clean

Remind your child how to wash their hands and cover coughs and sneezes. These simple practices may have been forgotten during the holidays but they make a huge difference in helping to stop the spread of infection. This helps protect more vulnerable people at home, including newborn babies, those who are pregnant or immunocompromised.

Pack some tissues in your child's school bag and make sure they know to throw used ones in the bin.

5. Vaccination
Making sure your child is up to date on all recommended vaccinations helps to:
- stop your child getting the infection they are vaccinated against, and
- make them less likely to be unwell if they do get an infection.

Routine childhood vaccinations
Routine childhood vaccinations protect against many significant viral and bacterial infections. Contact your GP if your child missed out on any of the routine childhood vaccines which take place in 5 visits from age 2 months to 13 months. Find out more about childhood vaccinations here.

Measles
There has been a rise in measles cases this year and it can be a serious illness. With much higher cases of measles in many European countries where children may have been on summer holidays, measles really is important to think about.

Two doses of the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine are needed for the best protection – the first is usually given at 12 months of age and the second when your child is at junior infants stage. Catch-up vaccines are available from participating GPs if your child is older than junior infants and has not received two doses of MMR vaccine.

Kid's nasal flu vaccine
Children are twice as likely as adults to catch the flu. That's why all children aged 2 to 17 can get their free nasal spray flu vaccine in the coming months. It is a safe and effective way to protect them and the rest of your family too. Go to hse.ie/flu for information on how to get the children's flu vaccine.

Children who are immunocompromised are also able to get a COVID-19 autumn booster from October.

6. Know your local care options
It can be hard to know when you should go to your GP or go straight to the hospital emergency department. Advice on when to contact your GP or go to a hospital emergency department is available here.

Find your local urgent and emergency care options by searching the HSE service finder. Note down your local GP out-of-hours phone number, emergency department and injury unit somewhere handy so you know where to go when the time comes.

For more health advice, listen to the back to school episode of the HSE Talking Health and Wellbeing podcast. Upcoming episodes feature experts discussing:

- Screen time
- Healthy school lunch boxes

The podcast series is available on Podbean, Apple Podcasts, Spotify and the HSE Health and Wellbeing YouTube channel.

For more information and advice, visit mychild.ie.