

05 February 2024

Dear parents and guardians,

Stop the spread of coughs, colds and other infections this winter

As is usual during winter months, UKHSA are seeing increasing levels of winter illnesses including flu, COVID-19 and other illnesses like whooping cough and measles in some areas outside the South West.

We are writing to share simple steps everyone can take to reduce infections spreading in the community – helping children make a healthy start to the year and minimising the impact of illness on attendance.

What infections are circulating in the South West?

At this time of year, other types of illnesses that circulate are **respiratory infections (colds, covid, flu) and whooping cough, scarlet fever and chickenpox**, as cases usually peak in late winter and early spring.

Symptoms of [respiratory infections](#) can include a runny nose, high temperature, cough and sore throat. For most children, these illnesses will not be serious, they soon recover.

Symptoms of [scarlet fever](#) include sore throat, fever, swollen neck glands, a bumpy rash on the tummy, flushed cheeks and 'strawberry tongue'. If you suspect your child has scarlet fever, contact your local GP; and if diagnosed stay away from nursery or school for 24 hours after the first dose of antibiotics.

Chickenpox is highly contagious, with the most common symptom being an itchy, spotty rash. If your child has [chickenpox](#), keep them off school until all the spots have crusted over.

[Whooping cough](#) starts with cold like symptoms and progresses to bouts of coughing which may make a 'whoop' sound (a gasp for breath)

Measles

There are currently increased levels of measles in the West Midlands affecting the school age population, with some children needing hospitalisation. Although we are currently seeing low numbers of measles cases, because measles is highly infectious, we are likely to see cases of measles in the South West in the coming months.

We therefore urge parents to get their children up to date with the MMR vaccination. This is the best form of defence against measles and has the added advantage of also preventing rubella and mumps.

Check your child's red book and make an appointment with your GP surgery to catch up on missed doses.

What can I do to prevent infections?

Teach good hygiene habits

Encouraging good hand-washing habits is one of the most effective ways to stop the spread. Regularly wash hands in soap and warm water for 20 seconds.

Using a tissue to catch coughs and sneezes, binning it and then washing hands will help prevent infection from spreading.

Our [e-bug](#) resources for all ages can help you to explain and discuss hygiene habits – and why they are important – to your child or teenager.

Spot the signs of when to keep your child at home

While children are encouraged to stay in education or childcare with symptoms such as a runny nose, sore throat or slight cough (if otherwise well and do not have a high temperature), children should stay home from school or nursery if they're displaying the following symptoms:

- If your child has a **fever and is unwell**, they should stay home from school or nursery until the fever has passed and they are well enough to attend.
- If your child has **diarrhoea and/or vomiting**, they should stay off school or nursery for at least 48 hours after their symptoms clear up – this will help stop the spread of stomach bugs.

Get vaccinated

Vaccination offers the best protection against many infections, including flu, measles and whooping cough. Please make sure that you and your children are up to date with their vaccines.

Being up to date with vaccinations, especially MMR and whooping cough, is also important for parents or staff who are pregnant. You can take a look at the [childhood vaccination schedule](#) to make sure your child is up to date with all their vaccinations.

Some useful resources

- NHS UK provides easily accessible guidance for parents to [help manage winter illness at home](#).
- Further back to school advice can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ukhsa-reminds-parents-of-back-to-school-advice>

- e-bug teaches children and young people about infections and infection prevention [Home \(e-bug.eu\)](http://e-bug.eu)
- A parent friendly website where you can learn about vaccines [Home | Vaccine Knowledge Project \(ox.ac.uk\)](http://www.vaccineknowledgeproject.ox.ac.uk)

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large loop followed by a series of smaller loops and a horizontal stroke.

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