

Natural Healing for Infants & Children

Howard Woodwind Morningstar, MD

In traditional societies, health and healing wisdom is passed down between generations of parents and children. In modern civilization, much of this knowledge has become the domain of professional “experts”. Many childrens’ health care decisions have been yielded by parents to medical professionals.

It’s a good idea to take responsibility for your children’s health care.

It’s best not to suppress symptoms unless they are particularly troublesome. These are often messages that point to some underlying imbalance, such as a food intolerance, environmental sensitivity or nutritional deficiency. If these are controlled early during childhood they can often be avoided entirely in adult life.

When to call for help

The time to call for professional help depends on your comfort level in dealing with your child’s health. It’s important to communicate with your child’s health care provider if you have any doubts, especially for infants under three months old.

When your child is ill, it’s a good idea to have in mind a system of evaluating the problem’s seriousness. This can help empower you to confidently assess and deal with common health problems in your children.

Start by considering your child’s behavior and activity level. Children with minor illnesses may be irritable, with reduced appetite and interest in usual activities. However, lethargy, loss of thirst, and bizarre behavior often mean a more urgent problem. In young infants, the sole symptoms of serious illness can be lethargy and reduced appetite.

Next, check your child’s breathing. Is it free and easy, or is she wheezing, using extra effort to breathe, or breathing rapidly? The normal newborn’s respiratory rate is around 30 to 40 breaths per minute, gradually decreasing to about 15 for teens. Obviously, breathing difficulties require immediate attention.

Notice the skin’s color & texture. A child that is excessively pale or has blue lips may be oxygen-deprived. An infant with a bulging or sunken fontanel should be evaluated immediately for meningitis or dehydration.

Look in your child’s mouth. Dry mucous membranes and cracked lips suggest dehydration,

while large tonsils with pus and putrid breath often indicate a bacterial infection.

Check the pulse by feeling for it at the wrist, or by listening to an infant's heartbeat with your ear. A newborn's normal heart rate is around 120 or so, gradually decreasing to 70 or 80 for teens. A more rapid heart rate can simply be the effect of a fever, but can also be a sign of bacterial infections or dehydration.

When you check your child's temperature remember that even benign viral illnesses can cause very high fevers, especially in young children. It's prudent to seek professional advice for any infant under three months old with a fever over 100, or for any child with a fever that lasts more than one week or that rises over 104 degrees. Children with fever and steady abdominal pain should be evaluated for appendicitis, while those with a severe headache, stiff neck and bizarre behavior should be checked for meningitis.

It's important to monitor a sick child's urine output. An infant that's not wetting its diaper normally, or a child with scant and concentrated urine is probably dehydrated. It's vital to continuously replace fluids if a child is vomiting or has diarrhea. Apple juice diluted with water and with a teaspoon of salt added per quart makes a good rehydration solution.

Caring for a sick child naturally

Children need extra support and comfort when they are ill. Adequate rest and an overall healing ambiance help promote healing. All sick children will greatly benefit from your loving comfort. An infant may require more holding, nursing, singing and rocking. Older children do well with reassurance, extra attention and healing rituals. These include flowers in the child's room, favorite foods and music, aromatherapy and gentle massage.

Switch to a lighter diet, emphasizing fruits, vegetables, soups and whole grains. Clear liquids, water and healing teas and extra Vitamin C will often be helpful when your child has a fever or infection.

It's true that the small systems of younger children and infants are more delicate than those of adults. However, the healing capacity of children can be incredible. Children often respond especially well to herbal and natural medicines. Whenever possible try gentle nutritive tonics herbs before using more potent herbs.

A good general principle of how to calculate the dose of herbal medicines for children is the "Rule of 12s". Compare your child's age to 12 and give the resulting fraction of an adult dose. So, a one year old gets 1/12 of the adult dose, while an eight year old gets 8/12ths. Give children twelve and over a full adult dose.

Combining herbal and allopathic medicines is rarely a problem. When in doubt, ask your health care provider. In many cases herbal and natural medicines reduce side effects from allopathic

drugs, such as the use of garlic and acidophilus with antibiotics to prevent yeast infections and harmful changes in digestive ecology. Sometimes herbs work synergistically with allopathic drugs, like the combination of echinacea and antibiotics for bacterial respiratory infections.

Specific childhood problems and natural remedies

Fever is a natural response that helps the immune system fight off infections. So, it's best to treat fever only if it's particularly uncomfortable to the child.

Many natural remedies can be used to help "draw out" a fever. Increase the child's intake of clear liquids, especially diaphoretic (fever-reducing) herbal teas. One of my favorite combinations is mint, chamomile, ginger, red clover and elder flowers. Tepid baths (96 degrees), and homeopathic pulsatilla are also effective. Be sure the child wears loose clothing, and don't over bundle!

Ear pain, often caused by middle ear infections, results in 16 million doctor visits in USA yearly. Ear infections are increased by exposure to environmental & food allergens, smoke and other irritating pollutants. These cause thickened secretions and swollen mucous membranes, clogging the ears' drainage through the child's narrow eustachian tubes, leading to stasis and then infection.

Acute middle ear infections are commonly treated with antibiotics in this country, even though research shows that these are generally not helpful. Chronic or recurrent infections are often treated by surgical placement of tubes in the child's ears.

Many parents are rightfully concerned about over use of antibiotics and other powerful drugs in children. Frequent antibiotics use can have detrimental effects on immune and digestive balance. It also increases bacterial resistance to antibiotics, fueling an accelerating "arms race" between medical science and rapidly evolving bacteria.

It's better to uncover and treat the causes of recurrent ear infections to facilitate lasting healing. For relief in the meantime, you can thin mucous and increase drainage with diaphoretic teas and herbal steams using lavender, thyme or eucalyptus essential oils. If the eardrum is not perforated topical application of an oil extract of garlic, mullein and St. John's wort can be very helpful. Chewing or jumping around can temporarily unblock the eustacian tubes, while cranio-sacral manipulation may have long term benefits for relieving mechanical obstruction.

Sore throats and respiratory infections are common in children of all ages. Here one must be alert to the possibility of strep throat. Current wisdom dictates the use of antibiotics to treat strep throat in order to prevent rheumatic fever, which would otherwise subsequently occur in around 1 of 500 infections.

Natural remedies for respiratory infections include salt water and lemon juice gargles, echinacea and goldenseal throat spray and tincture and licorice root tea. Goldenseal should be obtained from a responsible source that isn't further endangering this precious species. We should never

heal ourselves at mother earth's expense. Immune support with vitamin C, zinc and astragalus, lymphatic tonics such as echinacea and cleavers and natural anti-microbials such as garlic are often very helpful.

Constipation is most often a symptom of dietary problems, and can usually be corrected by changing your child's diet. For babies over six months of age try adding strained fruit to the diet. In older children increase water, fiber, whole grains, fruits and vegetables. Decrease constipating foods, especially cheese, unripe bananas and white flour.

Don't use laxatives unless absolutely necessary, as it's important to establish good habits early in life. Psyllium seed and senna are effective natural laxatives. If constipation persists, your child should be professionally evaluated for possible serious medical causes.

Diaper rash is a skin reaction to prolonged, irritating contact with stool, urine, perspiration and detergents. You can prevent and treat this problem by changing wet diapers frequently. Try using natural cotton diapers washed with hypoallergenic detergent. Reduce the use of occlusive rubber pants. Allow your baby to go without diapers when possible, letting air and sun dry the area. Avoid talcum powder or corn starch: if you must powder, use a clay-based product.

You can buy or make a healing ointment for diaper rash with plantain leaf, chickweed, calendula flowers, comfrey root and golden seal powder in a soothing base of almond oil and beeswax. Apply the ointment by gently rubbing it on the diaper area each time you change the diaper. If the rash does not respond to this treatment, or if it keeps reappearing, investigate factors such as the diapers, diet, or other disorders such as eczema or yeast infection.

Colic is intestinal gas distress that occurs in 10-15% of normal infants. Colic often causes hours of inconsolable crying spasms. This very upsetting problem can be due to digestive intolerance, especially to cow's milk proteins in infant formula. It's less common when breast feeding, when it can be a reaction to gas-producing foods in the mother's diet. These may include dairy products, onions and brassica (cabbage family) vegetables. Other common offenders include citrus fruits, very spicy foods and caffeine. Colic can also result from air swallowing and inadequate burping. Care for colic depends on discovering its causes. Eliminate anything that produces gas in the mother's diet. Try feeding with baby sitting up to avoid ingestion of air, and burp frequently.

Holding, rocking and singing to the infant may help. Try gentle abdominal massage in a clockwise direction or a dilute castor oil rub. Brew soothing carminative teas for the mother, with ginger, mint, chamomile, lemon balm, and catnip.

Colic may be a reaction to parental anxiety, so reducing anxiety in parents is important. If all else fails, remember that most babies outgrow colic by six months.

It's often frustrating and exhausting to deal with a baby that frequently cries, no matter what the reason. It's important to consider: What does crying mean to the child? Is this the only way it can

express negative experience? Is it about fear? pain? hunger? other discomforts?

It's also helpful to consider what crying means to the care giver. During infancy and early childhood, patterns develop that will shape lifelong communications & relations with others, so this is a time to nurture. Others can help by supporting and nurturing the care giver.

Treatment of the over-excitible, *irritable and sleepless child* needs to be based on correcting causes of the irritability. In the meantime, gentle nervine tonic teas such as oatstraw, lavender, chamomile, lemon balm and catnip are often helpful. In young infants these can be used in a bath.

The healing instincts of a loving parent are usually correct, so trust and honor these instincts. But, trust your fears too, and get professional advice if you are uncomfortable with any health problem in your child.

In all aspects of parenting, the most important thing to remember is to radiate tender loving care. Our children are the seeds of tomorrow and of all future generations. They respond to our love and caring in wonderful ways.

This overview is presented for educational purposes only. For herbal advice regarding specific health conditions consult a qualified health care professional.

This article originally appeared in ***Sentient Times***.

Howard W. Morningstar MD, board-certified family physician, is a graduate of Yale University School of Medicine and the California School of Herbal Studies. He and his wife Sue Morningstar CNM, women's health nurse practitioner, share a family medicine practice in Ashland, Oregon. They can be reached at (541) 482-2032.