



How to Choose and Build a Relationship with Your Child's Pediatrician

A Guide for Parents of Kids and Teens

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Children are not just miniature adults. They are individuals with bodies and minds that are always growing.

From infancy to the teen years, they will change physically, mentally and emotionally. Through it all, it's important they get regular checkups and are cared for when sick or hurt.

That's where a pediatrician comes in. Pediatricians care for children of all ages and have the expertise to help parents give their children the right start to a healthy life.



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How to Choose a Pediatrician for Your Child

Choosing your child's primary care doctor is important. We spoke to [Dr. Dan Mackey](#), a CHOC Children's pediatrician, who offered tips to help parents make the right decision for their child.

Does my child need a pediatrician?

It's important for children to see a pediatrician, rather than a family practitioner who may treat older members of the family. A pediatrician is specially trained to care for infants, children and teens. A pediatrician has graduated from medical school and completed a three-year residency program in pediatrics. A board-certified pediatrician has passed rigorous exams administered by the American Board of Pediatrics.

Kids are not "little adults." Different ages can present different illnesses and behavioral problems, which pediatricians are trained to recognize, diagnose and treat. Teens need pediatric care, too. Their bodies are still young and growing, their brains are still developing, and they are not yet ready for adult care, says Mackey.

A pediatrician's office is generally designed with kids in mind, with waiting areas and exam rooms geared toward making children feel comfortable and engaged.

Pediatricians' office schedules are usually created to accommodate same-day and sick appointments.

Questions to Ask

- Is this pediatrician in-network with my family's insurance plan?
- Is this pediatrician aligned with good pediatric subspecialists and their local children's hospital?
- Do I like this pediatrician's bedside manner?
- What is the interaction with office staff like?
- What are the office hours and is it easy to schedule an appointment?
- Does this office use paper or electronic medical records?
- What methods of communication does this pediatrician offer? Many offices offer phone, email and an online patient portal.

Part of the Family

Having an open dialogue with your child's pediatrician is important. Parents shouldn't shy away from asking questions. "Being available for questions is important to families," says Mackey. "A lot of teaching and education goes on over the years as the child grows up. It starts with educating the parent about nursing and nutrition, and continues with discussions about child safety, including issues like discipline and behavior."

In addition to being a trusted resource on parenting, your child's pediatrician is someone with whom you will spend a lot of time as your children grow up. "Hopefully the relationship the family has with the pediatrician becomes a very long and pleasant one that lasts many years," says Mackey. "Eventually, the pediatrician almost becomes part of the family, and a trusted member to turn to for help and advice. The best part of the job is getting to watch the child grow up."



When to See the Pediatrician

It can often be difficult for parents to decide what illnesses can be treated at home and which require a trip to the pediatrician. We spoke with [Dr. Michael Cater](#), a CHOC Children's pediatrician, about what ailments parents should keep a close watch for, and how to tell when it's time to make an appointment with their child's doctor.

- Many infectious diseases in children are associated with a fever. If a fever of 100.4 degrees or higher lasts longer than three days, then a visit to the pediatrician is needed for future evaluation.
- Labored breathing that doesn't respond to home remedies. This could be an indication of a more serious respiratory infection.
- If a child is vomiting and does not respond to dietary restrictions.
- Cases of diarrhea when the child doesn't respond to dietary restrictions.
- Sore throat associated with a fever and tenderness in the neck. This could indicate Strep throat, requiring antibiotics for the most effective treatment.
- Ear pain in conjunction with an upper respiratory infection such as a cold, especially if the ear pain begins four or five days after the onset of the cold. This is highly suggestive of an ear infection, requiring antibiotics for the most effective treatment.

Handwashing is the Best Defense

To avoid common infections this season, remember to get your family vaccinated against influenza, and practice proper hand washing technique. Children should wash their hands:

- Before eating
- After going to the bathroom
- After blowing their nose
- After playtime

Use hand sanitizer when you're on the go and think your child may have touched something contaminated with germs, but use actual soap and water when you see dirt. Spend at least 15 seconds vigorously washing hands front and back, and between the fingers.



What to Bring to the Pediatrician's Office

Getting kids out the door on time is stressful, and even more so if you're headed to the pediatrician's office for a well or sick visit. To make the process easier, and help parents maximize their time, consider the following guidelines of what to bring with you:

- Insurance card + identification
- List of medications the child is taking
- Paperwork or test results if your child has been seen anywhere else since your last visit, such as urgent care or the emergency department
- School paperwork if your appointment is tied to a physical for school activities
- Diapers, formula and other baby supplies such as a blanket and pacifier
- A favorite stuffed animal that can be "examined" by the doctor if your child is nervous about the visit
- A favorite book, game or tablet to keep your child occupied if there is a wait
- List of questions you and your family may have

Parents are encouraged to try and make childcare arrangements for other children, especially during flu season. To avoid delaying potential testing, parents are not encouraged to give their child a snack or drink while waiting to be seen.



Kids and Throwing Up: Should Your Worry?

Throwing up is no fun, for kids and parents alike. It can also be alarming. A CHOC Children's pediatrician explains what causes children to vomit and when to be concerned.

The most common cause of throwing up is a stomach virus, otherwise known as the stomach flu or acute gastroenteritis, according to [Dr. Reshmi Basu](#). It is often accompanied by diarrhea. Vomiting could also be caused by reflux in babies, a toddler's aversion to certain smells or foods, motion sickness, food allergies, food poisoning, urinary tract infection, appendicitis or other less common conditions.

"It's also really common for a child to cough so hard that they throw up," Dr. Basu says. "This can be scary, but should go away once the underlying cause of the cough is resolved."

Treatment for vomiting varies depending on the cause. In some cases, anti-nausea medication may be prescribed to give your child some relief. A stomach virus should clear up on its own after a few days. When vomiting is caused by reflux, food allergies or motion sickness, the underlying issue can be treated.

A child who vomits one time and has no other symptoms should be fine, Dr. Basu says. They may just have an upset stomach or strong gag reflex.

When to Call the Doctor

Call the doctor if your child:

- Is throwing up for more than two days but has no other symptoms
- Has severe abdominal pain with vomiting
- Has severe headaches with vomiting
- Has a high-grade fever with vomiting
- Has unexplained weight loss with vomiting, or
- Has any signs of dehydration (see below)

"Also, if your child or teen is throwing up periodically over a prolonged period of time, without any obvious reason, I would want to investigate that," Dr. Basu says.

Watch Out for Dehydration

Kids who have thrown up multiple times are at risk for dehydration, and that risk goes up the younger they are or if they also have diarrhea. Signs of dehydration include extreme fatigue, tired-looking sunken eyes, going several hours without urinating, dark

urine, dry lips, dry mouth, dizziness, and, in babies, crying without tears or a sunken soft spot. Your child should see a doctor immediately if they have any of these symptoms.

To prevent dehydration, encourage your child to drink lots of fluids. Pedialyte is best, but if they refuse that then offer what they will take such as water or diluted juice, although it is better to avoid milk. Your child's stomach may only be able to handle small amounts at first. Dr. Basu recommends starting with 1 tablespoon of fluid; wait 10 minutes, then try 2 tablespoons, and gradually increase as tolerated.

Your child should see a doctor if they cannot tolerate any liquids.



How to Make Shots Less Stressful at the Pediatrician's Office

When the Centers for Disease Control's recommended immunization schedule is followed according to plan, it is shown to be the most effective and safest way to protect your child from potentially fatal diseases, according to [Dr. Jasjit Singh](#), medical director of infection prevention and control at CHOC Children's. However, the process of going to the pediatrician and receiving shots can be stressful, or even anxiety-producing, for young children.

A patient's relationship with their pediatrician is important, and once you have found the right primary care doctor for your family, it can set the stage for their feelings toward medical professionals or clinical settings later in life. Studies show that preparing your children for vaccinations should ideally include three components: explaining what will happen, how it will feel, and strategies for coping with any related stress or discomfort. Follow these simple steps on how to make shots less stressful.

- **Be honest.** Tell children their vaccines may be uncomfortable or bothersome for a second or two, and have them practice slowly counting to two seconds so they get a sense of how long that really is. Tell them what to expect at their appointment, and explain why the procedure is necessary and how it will help them.
- **Use neutral language.** Request that the health care providers let your child know what will happen and when, using neutral language such as "we're ready to start," advises Dr. Marni Nagel, a CHOC Children's pediatric psychologist.
- **Encourage your child to ask questions.** Remind them that they can ask any questions they want to of their doctor or nurse.
- **Time the appointment well.** For babies and toddlers, scheduling the appointment around their bottle/feeding time may help. Receiving a bottle or feeding right after the shot may help soothe your baby.
- For infants, engaging in at least 4 of the 5 S's has been shown to reduce distress after immunizations, says Nagel. These include **swaddling, placing on the side/stomach while holding, making shushing sounds, rocking and sucking.** Sucking can be done through breastfeeding, a bottle or pacifier. For infants, dipping their pacifier in sugar water has been shown to decrease stress associated with immunizations. You can also talk to your doctor about breastfeeding during and/or after the immunization.
- **Topical anesthetics.** Ask your pediatrician if topical numbing agents may be appropriate for your child.
- **Control your reaction.** Children are increasingly observant as they get older, and they will take careful note of your reaction. Remain calm and be mindful of your demeanor, and it may help send a message to your child that they need not be stressed either.

- **Distraction techniques.** These will vary depending on your child's age and interests, but could include telling stories and jokes, looking at a picture book or finding a hidden picture like "Where's Waldo," or blowing bubbles.
- **Positive rewards/treats.** Consider going out for ice cream, going on a special outing such as to the park or playground, or another small treat after your appointment to encourage good behavior, or to soothe your child.



Antibiotics: What to Discuss with the Pediatrician

When a child gets sick, parents may be surprised if the pediatrician isn't quick to pull out the prescription pad for an antibiotic.

Most seasonal illnesses like respiratory infections, the flu and the common cold are actually viral infections, for which antibiotics have no effect. In many cases, your child's doctor will recommend treating the symptoms until the infection runs its course.

"It can be hard for parents because when our children are sick, we want to be able to do something for them," says [Dr. Katherine Andreeff](#), a CHOC Children's hospitalist. "In the case of viral illnesses, all we can do is support the body in its own process to fight the infection."

Antibiotics are only effective against bacterial infections, which can include urinary tract infections, blood stream infections and cellulitis, a common skin infection. Some infections – like pneumonia or ear infections – may be either viral or bacterial. Your child's doctor may choose to prescribe antibiotics or wait it out to see if symptoms improve on their own.

If your child's doctor prescribes an antibiotic, Dr. Andreeff recommends following these guidelines:

- **Don't be afraid to ask questions.** Ask the doctor what type of infection your child has and whether it is viral or bacterial, and discuss why the antibiotic is justified. "Antibiotics can change our body's natural balance of good bacteria, so you only want to take them if they are necessary," Dr. Andreeff says. "Repeated or lengthy courses of antibiotics may cause additional problems."
- **Take the antibiotic as directed.** If it isn't taken as frequently as prescribed or for the full duration of treatment, bacteria may survive and your child won't be fully healed. It also can create antibiotic-resistant bacteria – a real problem as researchers attempt to stay a step ahead and formulate new medicines that will work.
- **As with any medicine, beware of side effects.** According to Dr. Andreeff, "It's very important to only take medicine when the benefit of it outweighs the risk for side effects. Discuss this with your doctor and tell them about any reactions your child has."
- **Don't underestimate viral infections.** Even though they can't be treated with antibiotics, they can be severe. Always consult a doctor when your child is showing signs of illness.

Bottom line: Antibiotics are powerful medicines that are essential in treating certain infections. The key is their appropriate prescription and use.

Family Medicine Cabinet Essentials

In addition to a first-aid kit, a well-stocked family medicine cabinet can help families contend with a variety of ailments that children of all ages – and adults alike – might experience.

Here, [Dr. Jonathan Auth](#), a CHOC Children's pediatrician, lists the essential elements of a family's medicine cabinet.

Oral medications

Acetaminophen – Frequently known as Tylenol, this common over-the-counter medication is a first-line defense against fever and pain. He recommends that families stock children's acetaminophen rather than anything labeled as for infants. Though they used to differ in concentration, formulas are now the same, and children's versions are typically less expensive than those marketed to infants, Dr. Auth says. Download [a parent's guide to acetaminophen for children](#) to ensure you're giving your child the right dose.

Ibuprofen – Known in stores as Motrin or Advil, this medication also combats fever and pain. It can also help soothe swelling and other complaints associated with an injury, thanks to its anti-inflammatory properties. Ibuprofen's effects also last longer than acetaminophen, though it can irritate some children's stomachs, especially if taken on an empty stomach. Dr. Auth does not recommend it for children younger than 6 months old.

Diphenhydramine – Commonly known as Benadryl, this medication can have multiple purposes, Dr. Auth says. It can help children with mild allergic reactions, as well as those who have seasonal allergies and some cold symptoms. Dr. Auth cautions that it frequently has sedative side effects, and should not be given to children younger than 2 without first consulting a pediatrician.

Calcium carbonate – Known as Tums, these chews can help soothe upset stomachs. Dr. Auth recommends consulting your pediatrician before using them in children younger than 6, however.

Dimenhydrinate – Commonly sold in stores as Dramamine, this medication is good to have on hand for travel with children who are prone to motion sickness.

Topical treatments

Multipurpose antibiotic ointments – Commonly known under the brand names Neosporin or Bacitracin, these topical medications help reduce the risk of possible infections from scrapes and mild skin abrasions, Dr. Auth says.

Hydrocortisone, 1 percent – This low-potency topical steroid cream can help soothe itchy rashes or irritated skin.

Antifungal cream, 1 percent – Commonly known under the brand name Lotrimin, this cream is good for treating yeast diaper rashes, ringworm, and athlete's foot, Dr. Auth says.

Sunblock – Dr. Auth recommends families keep plenty of sunblock on hand: Barrier forms, which contain compounds like zinc oxide or titanium dioxide and block out the sun are safe at any age. UV A and UV B light absorbers containing PABAs can be used in children after age 6 months old. Dr. Auth also recommends families choose SPFs around 40 or 50. Anything marked higher than that shows minimal additional benefit.

Diaper cream – For families with newborns and young infants, having a diaper cream on hand is valuable, says Dr. Auth, who also recommends choosing a cream containing zinc oxide.

Petroleum-based ointments – These treatments can be helpful as a barrier, Dr. Auth says. For example, they can protect a cut against infection or can lock in moisture on chapped lips or dry hands.

Miscellaneous

Nasal saline solution – Dr. Auth recommends these products to help relieve infants' stuffy noses or older children's congestion.

Thermometer – Dr. Auth generally suggests families have a very basic and inexpensive digital thermometer that can be used orally for toddlers and children and rectally for infants.

Nail clippers and files – These are a necessity to keep children's fingers groomed. When it comes to trimming infants' nails however, files are safer and less intimidating for new parents, Dr. Auth says.

Bulb suction devices – These products are helpful in removing mucus from newborns, as well as in children who can't yet blow their noses.

Humidifier – This can be helpful for children suffering colds, Dr. Auth says. However, he cautions families to properly maintain humidifiers to prevent mold production or limescale build-up, which can worsen problems. Also, whether to use a warm or cold mist is generally a matter of preference, Dr. Auth says.

A word of caution

[Safely store medications](#) so that they are inaccessible to children.

With any medication, parents should pay special attention and adhere strictly to dosing instructions.

Every household should have the phone number for poison control readily available: 800-222-1222.

6 Things Your Pediatrician Wants You to Remember

We spoke to [Dr. Reshmi Basu](#), a CHOC Children's pediatrician, about 6 things your pediatrician wants you to know.

1. Get your flu shot.

The flu can make you much more sick than a regular cold and can have more complications, like pneumonia, so it's important that everyone in the household over 6 months old receives a flu shot. If there is a new baby in the family, you can protect the baby by making sure anyone in contact with the baby has received the flu vaccine.

2. Wash hands often to keep germs away.

Proper handwashing is especially important during cold and flu season. And remember to wash for at least 15-20 seconds and make sure to scrub between fingers and under nails.

3. Protect your child's skin.

During the winter it's important to moisturize frequently throughout the day, especially after baths or showers, to treat and prevent dry skin. And, if you'll be out in the sun, don't forget the sunscreen. It's best to apply it 15-30 minutes before sun exposure and reapply often.

4. Make well-child appointments and stay up-to-date on vaccinations.

When children are young, there are frequent well checks with the pediatrician and these appointments usually include vaccines. As children get older (after 5 years old) and vaccines are not a part of every visit, it is easy to forget the well checks. They are still important, however, to see how your child is growing, how she is doing in school, and discuss any concerns. It's also a good opportunity to get the flu shot (depending on the time of year) and make sure all other vaccines are up to date.

5. Stay active.

Find time to be active. Make it a family activity—go on a hike, ride bikes together or play in the park.

6. Read aloud to young children, starting at birth.

Try to read together for at least 15 minutes every day. Reading to your kids from a young age can help them with their speech development, communication skills and even academic performance. And it's a fun way to spend time together!