

Sunshine Pediatrics

Patient Education Series: Why is my child always sick?

For the typical child, the easy answer is that your child keeps getting exposed to germs that make him/her sick. That doesn't address the reason why you're asking that question though, does it? There might be one basic concern that drives that question: You're worried your child might have some strange immune disorder that makes him/her more susceptible to illness. While this is possible, it is very very rare, and it's a reason why keeping your regularly scheduled well and sick appointments with your pediatric office is so important. Your providers are trained to spot, diagnose, and treat a wide range of conditions and illnesses – not just bumps and scrapes.



Being exposed repeatedly to germs is only part of the answer. The other part of this is that an illness that seems to have gone on for weeks and weeks could really be one of two things. It could be that your child has just gotten 2 or 3 different illnesses back to back, or it could be that the one illness has just morphed into symptoms affecting different systems of your child's body.

Imagine a person walking up a long flight of stairs. If that person trips and falls and has to start back from the bottom, it's frustrating, but it's just part of the process. If that stairway was your child's path to wellness, any number of things could trip your child up and send him/her back to the bottom. Toys could be on the stairs, the lights could be off, or the child's shoes might be ill-fitting. Each of these examples could translate to real-world things in your child's life that could trip him/her up on the path to wellness. Maybe the child went back to daycare and was exposed to something else. Maybe the child's cousins flew in from Ohio and brought with them sniffles and a sore throat. Maybe you were exposed to something at work, and brought that home with you. Each of these things could knock your child back down the "stairs," where the journey to wellness seems the longest!

As for the second item, when an illness changes to affect different systems in your child's body, imagine when you, the parent, are sick. It usually starts with a sore throat one morning. By the end of the day, it worsens, and you prepare yourself for a head cold. By the second or third day, your nose starts running and you feel feverish. You take some Tylenol® and maybe something for your runny nose, and you hope it doesn't last long. Three to five days later, your nose is now spewing out green stuff, your throat feels like someone poured acid down it, and you feel even more exhausted because you're coughing all night. It's now one week after the sore throat began, and you're realizing this isn't going to be one of those quick head colds even though the fever is gone.



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Another week passes, and the cough has only gotten worse. You're drinking your cough syrup like it's water, and the congestion is moving into your chest. By the end of this next week, your fever has returned, and you finally see the doctor to find out that you have pneumonia. You get treated with antibiotics, and the pneumonia gets better, but your head congestion is still there. After 10 days of antibiotics, your fever returns, but now the doctor says you have a sinus infection. Another course of a different antibiotic, and many doses of cough and cold medications later, you're finally better. Whew! If you had gone to the doctor at every stage of this illness, you would've visited your doctor around six times. Even if you had gone six times, the doctor still could not have prevented the pneumonia, nor could he have prevented the sinus infection. The symptoms may have changed, but it was all part of the same illness.

Either of these two reasons doesn't stop us from telling you that your child needs to be seen at our office when he/she is sick. Children can worsen *extremely* rapidly, and the younger the child the more overwhelming an illness like the one described above can be. While an adult might wait 2 weeks before seeing his doctor, you should *never wait that long to see your pediatrician* if your child's symptoms are worsening. At the very least, call our triage nurse to determine if you do, indeed, need to come in. For a child, you might need to come in multiple times just to make sure the child is following a typical course for the prolonged illness, and not careening head first down the "stairs" at an alarming speed!

Never assume a child's body is the same as an adult. This might mean several visits and/or several copays, but just to save one copay, you could be gambling with odds you really wouldn't like. Let's face it, a baby can't say, "Mom, I feel so lousy, I think I need to go to the hospital."

