

Chapter 1

Your Child's Health in a Nutshell

In This Chapter

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Being a parent is a tremendous life-changing experience: The moment your little bundle of joy arrives, you suddenly morph into a provider, a full-time caregiver, and a nurse all in one go – quite scary, to put it mildly. Along with the dirty nappies and the sleepless nights, you have fevered brows to mop and big questions to answer. Should you call an ambulance or send your child back to bed with a kiss and a little infant paracetamol? How can you make sure that she's getting the right nutrients she needs to grow big and strong, and disease-free? What can you do to reduce the risk of accidents or illness? If your child becomes sick, who should you go to and how do you navigate the healthcare system? The list of questions is endless, but the chapter ahead narrows it down to the big three, outlining the general strategies you can use to keep your child healthy, spot the signs of illness, and care for a child who's under the weather.

Keeping Your Child Healthy

Illness is one of the things we fear most for our children. It's impossible – and unnecessary – to shield your child from every bug out there, but you can help to boost her health and vitality, making her stronger and better able to fight off illnesses efficiently.

Eat, drink, and be healthy

If you want your child to eat healthily, you need to serve her a wide variety of nutritious foods for energy, growth, and development. This means giving processed and junk foods a wide berth – but it doesn't mean not being flexible. Food isn't worth arguing over, and if your child insists on eating curly

cheesy crisps, that's fine – as long as they don't form her staple diet. If most of the food your child eats is nutritious, you'll be keeping her in tip-top condition. Try doing the following to make sure that she eats well:



- ✔ **Give your child at least five helpings of fruit and vegetables a day – fresh, frozen, canned, dried, or juiced.** You're probably already aware of this important point, but there's no harm in stressing it again. Fruit and veg contain the crucial nutrients needed to maintain a healthy digestive system, create new body tissue, fight infections, and a lot more. Try to offer your child at least one orange and one green fruit or vegetable every day, as they are known to be particularly beneficial and may help to prevent cancer and other serious diseases.

Fruit or vegetable juice only makes up one of her daily portions of fruit and vegetables, no matter how much she drinks. That's because other goodies in the flesh are not included in juice, and digesting whole fruit and vegetables benefits her system.
- ✔ **Make sure that your child eats breakfast.** Studies show that if your child eats breakfast, she's far less likely to become obese in later life. Skipping breakfast can cause blood-sugar problems and make your child's metabolism sluggish, which is bad for the digestive system. Most experts say that breakfast's the most important meal of the day: Breakfast eaters are less likely to contract diabetes or have high cholesterol, which is a known risk factor for heart disease.
- ✔ **Maintain your own healthy diet.** You're important too! Eating healthy food yourself is one of the best ways of getting your child into good habits, so make sure that you tuck in to your greens. Studies also show that children who have regular family mealtimes are more likely to have healthier diets than those who don't. Snacking in front of the telly is a definite no-no.
- ✔ **Offer as much unprocessed food as possible, and get into the habit of reading labels on the foods you serve.** Check for things such as hidden fats, sugars, additives, and salt. Foods with lots of preservatives and added flavourings are often deficient in essential nutrients and high in unhealthy (and unnecessary) chemicals. Salt's a particular danger – it can cause health problems, including high blood pressure and heart conditions. And sugar (and sugar substitutes), additives, and colourings have been linked with everything from behavioural problems to physical ailments.
- ✔ **Get your child to drink six to eight glasses of water a day.** Drinking enough fluids is vital. Water's the best drink by far – try to keep sugary drinks and juices to a minimum, and don't serve them at all between meals because they are lethal to tiny teeth. The British medical profession has been telling us for many years that most children aren't drinking enough. Dehydration leads to many short-term and long-term health problems: Lack of water can cause headaches, constipation, and poor concentration, to name but a few things.



A good way to tell whether your child's dehydrated is to check the colour of her urine. Her urine should be a pale straw colour: If it's dark yellow, she may well be dehydrated. A sunken fontanelle (the soft spot on a baby's head) can also indicate dehydration.

For more on healthy eating habits, head to Chapter 9.

A moving story

Exercise is vital for everyone – especially your child. Whether your child's dancing around the living room or entering a swimming gala, getting active is all good stuff. Exercise boosts circulation and helps infection-fighting lymphatic fluid to move throughout the body. Exercise is great for your child's emotional health too: When your child exercises, her brain releases chemicals called endorphins, the body's natural feel-good chemicals. Your active child develops stronger muscles and bones, is less likely to become overweight, has a reduced risk of developing type 2 diabetes, and has lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels compared with inactive children. For more details on the benefits of exercise and for suggestions for keeping your child active, check out Chapter 10.

Breathing easy

In the UK, around 17,000 children under the age of 5 years are admitted to hospital every year with illnesses related to passive smoking. Not smoking around your child is a crucial way of safeguarding her health. Scientists have shown that passive smoking has a lasting impact on the long-term health and respiratory system of children. Inhaling cigarette smoke increases the risk of asthma and other acute respiratory conditions and contributes to many childhood illnesses, including bronchitis, pneumonia, asthma, middle-ear infections, cot death, and possibly even autism. If your child inhales cigarette smoke, she's also at increased risk of developing certain kinds of cancer, including lung cancer. Research has even found a link between lower IQ levels and exposure to cigarette smoke.



Going outside the house to smoke doesn't fully protect your child – although of course outside is far better than smoking indoors. Research shows that poisonous chemicals from cigarette smoke cling to your clothes and hair and are released back into the air – and then inhaled by your child. When researchers measured toxic chemicals in the blood of children whose parents smoked outdoors, they found the levels of chemicals to be far higher than in children whose parents never smoked at all, inside or out.



Giving up the smokes

Giving up smoking is one of the best things you can do for your own body and your child's. The risk of premature death in smokers is double that in non-smokers. By stopping smoking, you reduce your risk of lots of diseases. You can buy aids to help you to stop smoking: Try nicotine gum, skin patches, hypnosis, or acupuncture

bands, all available over the counter in your local pharmacy. Go and see your GP or practice nurse if you feel you need more support, particularly if you'd like to attend a smoking-cessation clinic or self-help group funded by the NHS. Or try calling Quitline, run by an independent charity, on 0800-00-22-00.

Getting good sleep

Lack of sleep is the number-one cause of problems for all parents of young children. Sleep's particularly important for your child's health because it stimulates the hormones that make her grow. Sleep's also the time when your child's body does all its repair work, replenishing damaged tissues and cells and building a healthy immune system. Getting your child into good sleep habits can have a positive impact on her health and development. The best way of doing this is to establish a bedtime routine and make sure that your child is able to go to sleep by herself. Read more about bedtime routines in Chapter 11.

Staying safe

More than half of all accidents that happen to children under the age of 5 years occur in the home. The peak age for accident-prone behaviour is around 2 years, but babies enter the danger zone at around 9 months when they become mobile. In the early days, your baby needs complete protection. You need to develop a watchful caring eye, but safety equipment gives you extra peace of mind by protecting your little one in potentially dangerous areas such as the kitchen. Chapter 22 covers the basics.



The most important thing you ever buy your child is likely to be a child car seat. When you buy your car seat, ask a qualified shop assistant to check that the seat is suitable for your car and is fitted correctly. Research shows that up to 80 per cent of child car seats are not fitted properly, leaving many children extremely vulnerable.

All protected

Many doctors agree that vaccinating your child against dangerous diseases is the single most important thing you can do to protect her health. Before the use of vaccines, many children died from diseases such as whooping cough and polio. Immunisations have now all but eradicated many serious diseases in the UK, but illnesses such as polio can still be brought back from trips abroad and caught by children (and adults) in the UK who haven't been immunised. If your child hasn't been vaccinated and is exposed to germs, her body may not be strong enough to fight the infection. To find out more about the pros and cons of vaccinating your child, head to Chapter 3.

All you need is . . .

. . . love! To thrive, your child needs lots of cuddles and human contact, particularly with her main carers. Studies show that lack of love and affection is as damaging to children as food deprivation: Adequately nourished babies deprived of human relationships become impeded in their development in both mind and body.

We cannot overemphasise the importance of touch – human contact is critical for development and well-being. Babies who are held cry less than those who aren't, and those who're cuddled and massaged frequently tend to have better immune systems and handle stress more efficiently than those who aren't. The need for touch continues into childhood and beyond. One study showed that when children were massaged regularly for a month, blood glucose levels dropped dramatically in diabetic children and the children were able to reduce their medication, while asthmatic children had fewer asthma attacks. Massage also reduced the symptoms in children with autism, severe burns, cancer, and arthritis.

Spotting the Signs That Something's Wrong

Even if you do everything right, your child'll get ill – and probably quite frequently. This isn't a bad thing: Your child's body needs to come into contact with bacteria and viruses in order to build up a good resistance to the germs. In fact, some research shows that the more illnesses your child gets in the first few years of life, the healthier she's likely to be later.

Of course, you won't welcome every cold and tummy bug your child falls victim to. After all, caring for an ill child can be extremely worrying, especially when you can't quite work out what's wrong. Try to keep things in perspective: All children get ill, and in the vast majority of cases the illnesses aren't serious and don't pose any threat to your child's long-term health. However, if you're at all concerned about your child, get her checked out by a doctor. And try to be aware of the signs of diseases such as meningitis, which need urgent medical treatment (skip to Chapter 13).

The person who can tell better than anyone else whether your child is ill is *you*. Follow your instincts: You're likely to be able to spot when something's not quite right. Signs that your child has a bug include the following:

- ✔ **A fever:** The presence of a fever almost always means an infection. Fever itself is not dangerous – it's the body's normal reaction to the presence of foreign organisms – but you need to bring down your child's temperature to avoid overheating, which can cause a febrile convulsion.
- ✔ **Irritability or lethargy:** Your child's behaviour may be influenced by a fever. The raised temperature may make her irritable, drowsy, or lethargic.
- ✔ **Coughing:** This is a common sign that your child has an infection.
- ✔ **Vomiting and diarrhoea:** Symptoms like these are usually associated with problems directly involving the tummy or bowel, such as gastroenteritis or food poisoning, although sometimes they occur for other reasons. Some children vomit if they have a high temperature; others vomit if they're emotionally upset.



Yes, diarrhoea really can be a cause for celebration! If your child is suffering from diarrhoea as well as vomiting, she probably has a tummy bug, which usually settles on its own with no ill effects (you can find out more in Chapters 14 and 17). Vomiting without diarrhoea, especially if accompanied by fever, may have a different cause such as a urine infection. If you're in doubt, ring NHS Direct (0845-4647) or speak to your GP or health visitor.

- ✔ **A rash:** Rashes often suggests a viral infection. The presence of a rash doesn't usually make the illness any more serious – in fact, it can help your doctor diagnose illnesses such as German measles and chickenpox. But if your child has a rash, ask your doctor to check it out to ensure that she's not displaying a symptom of meningitis or another dangerous illness.



The easiest way to test for meningitis is the 'glass test'. Press the bottom of a glass on to your child's rash. If the rash fades or disappears, it is almost certainly not meningitis; if the rash remains, your child may have meningococcal septicaemia (blood poisoning) – so call an ambulance immediately.

The list above is a very general description of a few of the most common childhood symptoms. More detailed info on what to look out for appears elsewhere in the book. If you're caring for an infant, head to Chapters 7 and 8, which are devoted to infant healthcare. For older children, go to Chapter 14.

Knowing When to Call a Doctor

You may find it hard not to worry about the slightest snuffle your little darling gets, but more often than not it's nothing serious. However, you do need to call a doctor if:

- ✓ Your baby under 3 months old has a fever – this must always be regarded as potentially serious.
- ✓ Your child's listless or miserable even after you've brought down her fever.
- ✓ Your child's breathing is rapid or laboured.
- ✓ Your child's colour changes from pink or red to mauve or blue.
- ✓ Your child has a convulsion (fit).
- ✓ Your child loses consciousness.
- ✓ Your child has blood in her urine, vomit, or stools.

Keep in mind that young children can develop dangerous symptoms quite rapidly. If your child's poorly, keep a close eye on her and call your doctor if you're in any doubt.

Who You Gonna Call?

For most of us, the local doctor's surgery is our first port of call for health problems. Your GP can make a diagnosis, prescribe medication, and refer your child to other health services if necessary. But you don't always need to see a doctor if your child's under the weather. No one wants to go to the doctor unless they really have to – there may be a DIY solution, but if not, you need to decide whether a visit to the doctor or A&E is necessary.

Trying a bit of DIY

- ✓ A well-stocked medicine cabinet helps you treat many everyday illness and minor ailments at home. A small supply of infant paracetamol or ibuprofen syrup goes a long way and can help a whole array of problems, from coughs and fevers to toothache. Keep stocked up on infant paracetamol – fevers and other symptoms are more common at night, and the last thing you need at 3 a.m. is to discover that the medicine cabinet is bare. Chapter 18 tells you what you need to know about medications. Have a look at the Cheat Sheet at the front of the book for a list of basic first aid supplies.

- ✔ Your local pharmacist's a good source of help. She's an expert on medicines and how they work and can offer advice on common childhood complaints. Your pharmacist can recommend over-the-counter remedies for your child and give advice on whether you should take your child to the doctor. Chapter 4 gives info on pharmacists and other healthcare professionals.
- ✔ NHS Direct (0845-4647) is a nationwide service providing health advice over the phone. Nurses and professional advisors staff the lines. The NHS Direct service is a good place to start if you need non-emergency medical help outside normal surgery hours. NHS Direct is open every day of the year, 24 hours a day.
- ✔ There are nearly 70 NHS walk-in centres throughout the UK. They offer free, fast, convenient access to healthcare advice and treatment for minor illnesses and injuries and can be a good alternative to A&E. Most of the walk-in centres open seven days a week, from early morning to late evening, and are run by experienced nurses. You don't need an appointment. To find out about your nearest walk-in clinic, check out www.nhs.co.uk.

Going to your doctor or casualty

Working out whether you to take your child to the doctor or straight to A&E depends on the severity of the problem. If the problem's not urgent, you should be able to get an appointment at your local surgery within a day or two – but remember to cancel it if your child's symptoms subside. Most GPs' surgeries fit you in if you just turn up with your child, although you may have to wait a while. Your doctor likely has an emergency out-of-hours service for urgent medical problems that can't wait until the next day. Most surgeries have an answering-machine message giving an out-of-hours telephone number or referring you to NHS Direct. Go to Chapter 17 to find out what to expect if your child needs to take a trip to hospital.



Many people go to A&E, but they can be treated just as professionally – and often more quickly – at a minor-injuries unit. Minor injuries units, which are usually located near major hospitals, cater for patients with less serious injuries and ailments, such as sprains, cuts, bites, stings, and eye or head injuries. The waiting times at minor injuries units are usually much shorter than those in A&E. You don't need an appointment. If you aren't sure if your child's injury can be treated at a minor injuries unit, call NHS Direct on 0845-4647, which can advise you and direct you to the most appropriate place.



Call 999 or take your child straight to A&E if the situation is critical or life-threatening – for example, if she's losing a lot of blood, is unconscious, is having difficulty breathing, or has been poisoned by something.