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Bundle up and protect kids from season's ills

While winter in New England is beautiful and invigorating, its frigid dry air, wind, and snowstorms present health care challenges. Children, with their immature immune systems, are at increased risk of infection.

Poorly insulated, compared to adults, children are more likely to face the perils of frostbite and hypothermia. It goes without saying that winter sports present their own dangers, as do poorly functioning heating systems.

Infection

We all know, from personal experience that upper respiratory illness is a common winter occurrence. Rarely does one get through the season without at least one bout of nasal congestion, sore throat, cough, or flu-like muscle aches and pains. Children who are exposed to these infectious agents may experience these symptoms, along with fevers, once or twice a month. However, if its mother has immunity, an infant younger than 6-12 months is protected from many infections by antibodies transferred during pregnancy.

Influenza and RSV (respiratory syncytial virus) are the two most common infectious agents seen at this time of year in New England. It's not too late to get an influenza vaccination, but there is not a vaccine available for RSV. The best protection comes from frequent hand washing, increased humidity in the home (a cold air humidifier), and, for infants under four months of age, avoiding crowded public environments.

Although we've had few cases of influenza this year, there is currently an outbreak of RSV in the region. Small infants are disproportionately affected, experiencing fever, cough, wheezing, labored breathing, and eating difficulties. These symptoms are caused by infections. If your child has these symptoms, see your pediatrician.

Hypothermia

In cold weather, children can cool off very quickly if not dressed properly. Compared to adults, children have a larger area of skin surface that lacks insulating layers of fat.

Parents and caregivers must monitor children's outdoor activities, dress them in several layers of clothing, make them wear hats and mittens, and keep them dry. Older infants and young children should wear at least one more layer than the adults around them.

A child is shivering, cold, and lethargic, he may be suffering from hypothermia. Get him to a warm environment, dry him off, wrapped in any type of warm material. Call 911.

Frostbite

Frostbite is the freezing of skin exposed too long to the cold. At first, the area feels as if it has been burned. Without intervention, all sensation is lost and the area becomes numb.

If exposed skin appears white or grey, treatment requires slow warming in lukewarm, not hot, water. Avoid rubbing the affected area, as that may cause skin damage. If the numbness and burning do not resolve in a few minutes, call your doctor.

Fingers, toes, ears and the face are the most common areas affected by frostbite. Make sure these areas are covered when the kids venture outside on cold and windy days and teach them to seek assistance if their skin begins to burn.

Dry Skin

Even the supplest of skin dries out in the winter. Cool air doesn't contain much moisture to begin with, and when heated, it loses any moisture that might have been present. When skin loses moisture to the air, it begins to crack and itch. Scratching causes further damage and infections are quite common.

Treatment includes taking shorter showers and fewer baths in the winter, using a mild soap product with moisturizer added, and adding moisturizing agents to the water. Apply additional moisturizers to the skin as needed. Petroleum-based products are the most effective. Children can also benefit from the same products their parents use. If these interventions are not successful, see your physician for a more potent strategy.

Bloody Nose

Winter nosebleeds are common, as noses, like skin, suffer from dry air. To reduce the risk of nosebleeds, add a cold air humidifier to your child's room and consider using a saline nasal spray.

A small amount of Vaseline applied inside the nostrils, every night at bedtime, is also a simple, safe, and effective strategy. If the nosebleeds persist, see your physician.

Winter weather exacts a toll from us all. Spring will soon bring relief and symptoms should begin to subside as soon as we turn off our heating units.

Until then, if symptoms become intolerable, see your pediatrician, or call your travel agent to book a trip to a warm moist climate. Florida and the Caribbean are especially inviting at this time of year, and both you and your skin will feel better. Of course, flying puts you at risk for catching a viral infection from the person in the next seat. Something else to keep in mind.

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