

# When are kids too sick to go to school?

By James Miller

As tired as we all are of how COVID-19 has shaped the world we live in, it is still important to follow the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's guidance on staying home when children and adults are infected with the pandemic virus. Unfortunately, there are many other viruses and bacteria making us sick.

Since school resumed in August, and with it the RiverStone Health School-based Clinics, I have seen more and more kids being sent to school with active illness. When asked, students tell me that their home COVID-19 test was negative, so their parents sent them to school.

At that point, it is up to the child's healthcare provider to determine when the child should return to school. I'm often asked how this decision is made. My answer is: It depends on the child's symptoms. The three main symptoms that affect the child's return to school are fever, vomiting and diarrhea.

- **Fever** is a temperature greater than 100.4 degrees. This should be the standard for keeping a child out of school. A child should stay home for a minimum of 24 hours after the fever has broken without the use of fever-reducing medications such as Ibuprofen and Tylenol. Fever generally indicates that the body is fighting off a bacterial or viral infection. The body increases its temperature to slow down the germs' reproduction. That allows the body to rid itself of the infection. We specify "without fever reducing medications" because if Tylenol is taken at the onset and then around the clock, it's impossible to know when the fever has truly broken.
- **Vomiting** should keep a child out of school. A child may return to school 48 hours after the last episode of vomiting -- without the use of medications, like Zofran, that stop vomiting. Vomiting is the way the body expels potential toxins. When a person has a bacterial or viral infection that effects the gastro-intestinal tract, the stomach considers it a toxin. Vomiting is the way the body gets rid of that toxin. Vomit may contain live bacteria or virus that can then infect another child.
- **Diarrhea** should keep a child home sick. A child with diarrhea may return to school 48 hours after the last episode of diarrhea. Three or more loose or watery stools a day is considered to be diarrhea. Everybody is different, so any variation from the child's normal stools should be considered. Staying home for 48 hours is necessary because of the way people get intestinal bugs. The fecal-oral route is the most common mode of transmission. Children tend to put everything in their mouths and do not wash their hands well enough. That is how viruses and bacteria spread from one child to another.

It is important to consider the wellbeing of your children as well as their classmates. If your children are sick, please keep them home. And never hesitate to ask your children's healthcare provider if you have questions.

*James Miller, Physician Assistant-certified, cares for students at RiverStone Health Clinics at Orchard Elementary School and Medicine Crow Middle School. He can be reached at 406-247-3210.*