

Hawkes Bay Today Vital Signs Column, February 2012.

When I was growing up, I wondered why we had a Mother's Day and a Father's Day and not a Children's Day and my Dad used to say that it was children's day every day! Now the stakes have been evened out and on the 4th of March, we'll be celebrating Children's Day with events across the country (details at <http://www.childrensday.org.nz/>).

In March we also have the opportunity of supporting the Child Cancer Foundation, with their "Beads of Courage" collection day on Friday 23rd March. For the month, purchase a pair of children's sunglasses at Ahuriri Pharmacy and 50% of the price will go to the Foundation. Supporter's bead bracelets will also be available. With all this focus on little ones, I thought it would be fitting to write about common conditions that affect children.

Teething usually occurs between 5-7 months of age. Some children find this painful and may also suffer from fever, loss of appetite, dribbling and difficulty sleeping. To help, massage your baby's gum with a clean finger, give teething rings to chew on or gels or Paracetamol may also provide relief. Check with your pharmacist the dose of Paracetamol that is suitable for your child's weight.

Colic is stomach pains which can occur in healthy babies between 2-16 weeks of age. We don't know what causes it and it can be frightening. Your baby may cry inconsolably, clench their fists and draw their legs up to their tummies. Thankfully most babies grow out of colic but in the meantime try to keep yourself and your baby calm and spend time soothing your baby. Quiet music and a warm bath may help. Check that formula is made up correctly if bottle feeding. Gripe water or Infacol may be helpful as well.

Fever is when the body temperature rises above 37.2°C and is usually caused by an infection. Most fevers will clear up of their own accord but Paracetamol can help speed up the process. Sponging down children with tepid water may also help. It is important that any child with a temperature greater than 39°C or a fever that lasts for more than 24hrs, is taken to a Doctor.

Pain is a sign that something is wrong, and can indicate damage to bone or tissue. The symptoms are usually short-lived and can be managed at home with medicines such as Paracetamol or Ibuprofen. Always check the dose instructions with your pharmacist and use proper medicine-measuring spoons or syringes. Keep a close eye on your sick child, to check for signs that things might be getting worse and take him/her to the doctor immediately if the pain is still there after 24hrs.

It is important to know when the signs are more serious so you know when to seek medical care. For babies and very young children, that is when they continue to cry after you have tried things such as food, nappy changes and cuddles. For older children, the signs are when they are quiet and withdrawn; when they tug at their ears; if floppy, pale and hard to wake or not responding to you; has an unusual cry for longer than an hour; develops a rash or stiff neck; sensitive to light; when they are anxious, angry or frightened, or when they avoid their usual activities.

Vomiting and diarrhoea causes the loss of body fluids and important electrolytes and can result in dehydration. Children under 12 months of age can become dehydrated very quickly. Look out for the danger signs of dry mouth; sunken eyes or fontanelle; cold hands and feet, or mottled bluish skin; unusual lack of energy; fewer wet nappies than usual, or unable to drink. If your child has these signs or vomiting continues for longer than 3hrs or diarrhea for 24hrs, call your doctor.

If you are breastfeeding, continue this. You may need to feed more often and you may need to give extra fluid. An oral rehydration solution is specially-prepared to contain the right amounts of electrolytes, glucose and water to replace lost nutrients. Give small amounts of fluid often and offer regularly.

Constipation is when changes occur to your child's bowel motions. If your child passes a stool less than once every 3 days, he/she is likely to be constipated. It often involves pain and if the child is uncomfortable while passing stools, he/she may 'hold on', causing more constipation. If breastfeeding, continue to feed regularly; if bottle-fed, give warm boiled water between feeds and check that you are making up the formula correctly. Massaging the child's tummy in a clockwise direction may help, otherwise Coloxyl drops can be used to soften the stool.