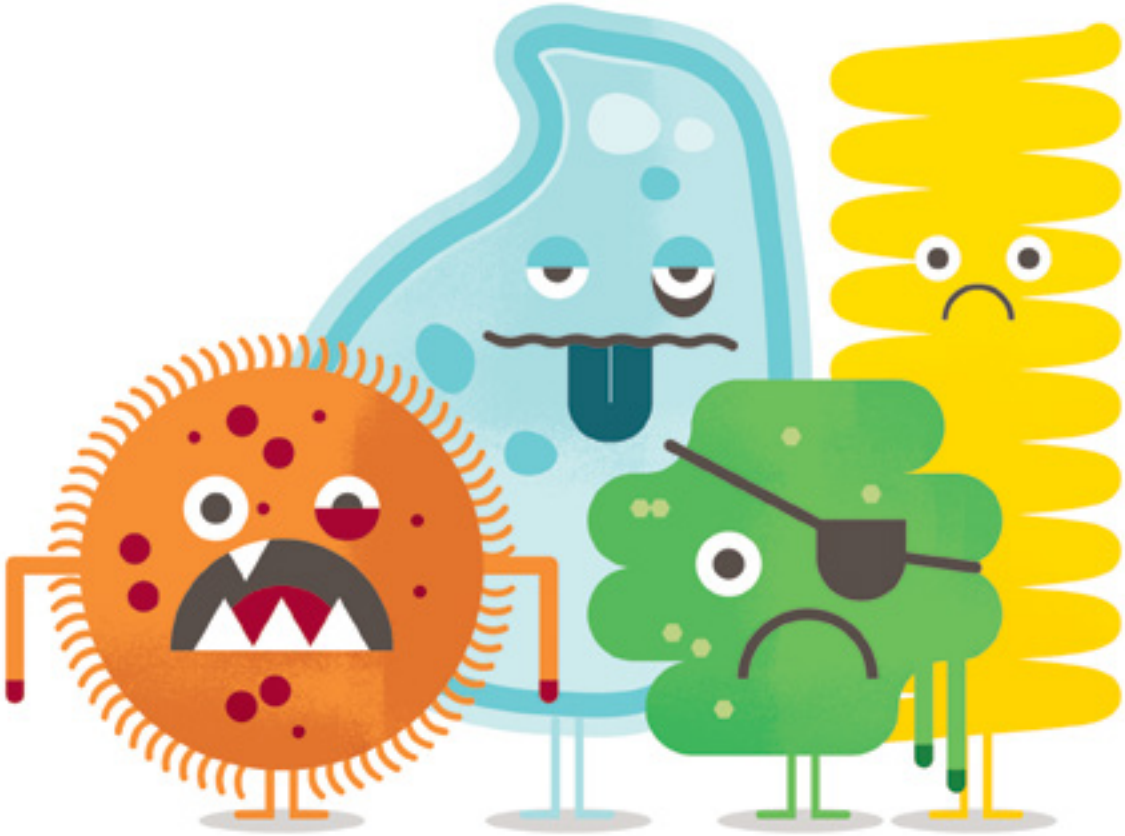
Cara Siffka/Stocksy

Resistance Movement

Kids who wash their hands at least four times a day have 24 percent fewer sick days from colds and flu, and 51 percent fewer sick days due to stomach illnesses.

– American Public Health Association



The school year has barely begun, but cold and flu season is around the corner and all you can think is: germs everywhere. The good news is that kids' immune systems are designed to resist disease-causing bacteria and viruses. And when it comes to keeping that system strong, there's a lot you should—and shouldn't—do.

DO

Make Hand-Washing a Habit

Teach kids to scrub their whole hands—up to the wrists and under the fingernails—and to do it long enough to sing the ABCs or "Happy Birthday" all the way through. A timer works well, too.

Get Them Vaccinated

Don't skip the annual flu shot (see Shot Talk, next page), and stick to recommended immunization schedules. Experts agree vaccines are extremely important for developing an immune system that prevents childhood diseases, and is strong for the long haul.

Keep Them Home When They're Sick

If your child runs a fever, keep him home for 24 hours after it breaks. Lots of rest will help him get better faster, and you'd want other parents to do the same.

Promote Good Gut Health

Many foods help build good gut bacteria, including yogurt (look for labels that say "live and active cultures" and don't have added sugar), kefir, pickled or fermented foods, cruciferous vegetables, beans, and blueberries. If your child is on antibiotics, which can wipe out both harmful and helpful bacteria, a probiotic supplement can help.

Disinfect During and After Illness

Change the bedding and wipe down light switches, doorknobs, and remote controls. When a child is sick, a little disinfecting goes a long way toward protecting the healthy and preventing relapse.

Get Them to Bed on Time

Sleep is when the body does all of its repair work, and not getting enough can inhibit the immune system. If you're not sure just how much your child needs, see So Just How Many Hours of ZZZs Do They Need?, page 36.

DON'T

Dole Out Daily Vitamins

Most kids get the vitamins they need through diet, provided they're eating balanced meals. That's true even for picky eaters, who are rarely nutritionally deficient. Children who live in the foggy patches of the Bay Area and don't see much sunshine may get a boost from some vitamin D. Always check with your pediatrician before starting any supplements.

Rush to Request Antibiotics

Since most colds and flus are viruses, and antibiotics only kill bacterial infections—like strep and some (but not all) ear infections—they likely won't help when a child gets sick. Taking antibiotics when they're not needed can actually be harmful because they wipe out the good bacteria along with the bad, which may leave your child's system with inadequate defenses.

Battle with Them over Bundling Up

Being cold doesn't lead to catching a cold (though bodies are better able to mount a defense when they're not working too hard to stay warm). Left to their own devices, kids will quickly learn that they'll be more comfortable playing outside if they're dressed appropriately.

Bother with Anti-Bacterial Soap

It won't help prevent viruses and studies show it doesn't fight bacterial infections any better than plain old soap and water. Also, it may breed new and stronger bacteria as old strains develop resistance to the antibiotics.

Let Vigilance Turn to Obsession

Kids are like sponges, so they'll soak up your germophobia and make it their own if you're not able to keep it in check.

A Good Shot

For most of us, getting the flu means feeling feverish and achy for a week or so, and then getting back to normal. But for some, it can be much more serious—even deadly. That's why the Centers for Disease Control recommends everyone six months or older get the latest flu vaccine. Here, Stanford pediatrics professor and immune specialist Dr. Yvonne Maldonado addresses questions about the flu shot.

I've heard that people can get sick from the shot itself. Is that true?

YM: No, the vaccine doesn't cause the flu. But there frequently are overlapping viruses circulating at the same time as the flu, and those may cause symptoms similar to the flu. The shot's aftermath is generally just soreness at the injection site for a few days. Occasionally, people may experience one to two days of mild side effects—like low fever and weakness—that are much less severe than the actual flu.

What's the ideal timing for taking the flu vaccine in the Bay Area?

YM: The vaccine is usually available starting in September, and flu season runs from October to March. Getting your kids vaccinated sooner is better, so their bodies can build up immunity to the virus. However, vaccinations as late as January can still help provide protection when the flu is circulating.

Our family was vaccinated, but we all still got the flu. What happened?

YM: Flu vaccines are 60 to 100 percent effective, depending on the year, the population, and the age of the patient. Early each year, vaccines are formulated to protect against three to four viruses that flu experts predict will be most common during flu season. But some years, there may be viruses circulating that aren't covered by the vaccine. If you get vaccinated and still get the flu, your symptoms will likely be less severe and won't linger as long, which means you'll have a lower risk of complications as a result.

The flu shot isn't as important as other vaccines, is it?

YM: Flu vaccinations can not only help keep your family from getting sick, they also protect people around you who might be at greater risk of serious complications, like infants under 6 months, older adults, and people with chronic illnesses. Recent studies showed that the flu vaccine reduced children's risk of flu-related pediatric intensive care unit admission by 74 percent during flu seasons from 2010 to 2012, and that babies of women who got the shot while pregnant were 92 percent less likely to be hospitalized for the flu.

Is the nasal spray as effective as the shot?

YM: Recent studies suggest that kids between 2 and 8 may get more protection from the spray. Some kids need two doses of vaccine (and they don't have to be in the same form). The spray also works for older children and for adults up to age 49 who aren't pregnant or on long-term aspirin treatment, and who don't have asthma, egg allergies, or weakened immune systems. It's easy to take, so some people prefer it to an injection. Babies between 6 months and 2 years, pregnant women, and adults over age 50 need to take the shot instead.

Who should be vaccinated?

YM: Everyone in the family who is 6 months and older—including kids' caregivers—should get the flu vaccine each year. Talk to your doctor about which vaccine is appropriate, and any potential allergies or complications.

Meet Dr. Maldonado

From whooping cough to polio to flu, Dr. Yvonne Maldonado, chief of infectious disease at Stanford Children's Health, is one of the fiercest enemies any virus could encounter.

Her work studying some of childhood's most devastating diseases—malaria, polio, measles, HIV—has taken her from small towns in Northern California

to Mayan enclaves in remote Mexico and impoverished villages in Zimbabwe. One of Maldonado's current projects is heading up a study to investigate the person-to-person transmission and environmental spread of the live, oral polio vaccine in Mexican communities. The results of the study could affect public policy not only in Mexico, but all around the world.

Maldonado, a mom of three, sees her work with children as a way to improve the health of everyone in the world. "There's no doubt that keeping children healthy is the right path to keeping us all healthy."

Photo: Jeff Singer; Hair and makeup: Tacha Scott/Zenobia