

## **Doctor Calls**

*The University of Pittsburgh  
Office of Child Development*

Their four-month-old son had cold-like symptoms and a temperature of 101 degrees. Susan was on the phone in a flash. “Here we go again,” said her husband Ron.

The couple disagrees on when to call the doctor. Ron feels you should not call at every snuffle. Susan believes it is better to be safe than sorry, that a fever, for example, could be a symptom of any number of horrible illnesses.

Both views are valid, to a degree. A fever can be a sign of a serious condition, but often is not. It is better to be safe than sorry when it comes to your child’s health, but every snuffle does not constitute a medical emergency.

So when should you call? The answer, unfortunately, is: It depends. It depends on the symptoms, the age of your baby, your knowledge and experience, your doctor’s advice, and what puts your mind at ease.

This is Susan’s and Ron’s first baby. They haven’t had much experience with childhood illness.

They can help themselves and their baby by getting a few books on infant and child care and a family medical guide. Ask your doctor for recommendations. These books can be your first course of action, and many tell you directly what action to take under which circumstances.

As a rule, medical emergencies always require you to act quickly and call your doctor or health professional. These situations include a serious accident, injury, or possible poisoning; bleeding that can’t be stopped; unconsciousness; severe breathing difficulties; convulsions; sharp abdominal pain lasting longer than two hours; loud, deep, dry coughs; a black or bloody bowel movement; and severe diarrhea.

Other symptoms should be called to your doctor’s attention, even though they may not warrant emergency action. These include painful bowel movements, a temperature of 101 degrees or higher that lasts longer than 24 hours, a rash accompanied by a fever, and forceful vomiting.

Take advantage of visits to your doctor or other health professionals to ask about important symptoms or any concerns you might have.

You and your doctor should work as a team. Your doctor should be sensitive to your concerns, and you should respect your doctor’s opinions. A good family medical book can be a great help to you both.

But, if you are ever in doubt about something troubling your baby, call the doctor or medical hotline.

*This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.*