

Unsure how to explain complex medical concepts like virus, contagious, and disease, to your child? Here are some suggestions from a Child Life Specialist for how to break those concepts down in a way that is less scary to a child:

Sometimes parents use concepts like “good germs and bad germs” or “those mean old germs that made grandpa sick” but anthropomorphizing (giving human qualities to a non-human thing) can be confusing and scary for a child. It’s important to emphasize that germs do not have thoughts or feelings. We don’t want children to think of disease as if it’s a malevolent, invisible being. You know what else are malevolent, invisible beings? The monsters under the bed! Let’s not add to their fear and worry.

Explaining Germs and Viruses

Tell your child:

“Germs like viruses are teeny tiny living things you need a strong microscope to see. They are alive, but in the way that plants are alive, without thoughts or feelings or intentions. They grow, and plants grow, but plants don’t get sad or mad or happy. Germs and plants are not like animals or people. Germs don’t *try* to make anyone sick; they don’t know what they’re doing. Thoughts and feelings come from the brain and germs don’t have a brain like we do.

“Some germs are healthy, like the bacteria in yogurt. That type of bacteria is helpful to our bodies when we eat it. It helps our tummies digest our food better. But some types of bacteria are not healthy and they can make us sick.

“A virus is a different type of germ that can make people sick.

“The coronavirus is the name for a type of virus that is making some people sick right now. COVID-19 is the name of the sickness people get from the coronavirus. Viruses don’t live forever, so it will stop making people sick after some time. When that happens, it will be okay to go back to school.”

How Does It Make You Feel?

“When someone gets COVID-19, they might cough, and have a fever, and feel tired. They need to rest a lot, drink lots of water, and maybe take some medicine to help their fever go away.”

What If I Get Sick?

“Kids don’t usually get sick from coronavirus. But if they do, they rest and drink water and take the medicine their mom or dad gives them, and they feel better soon, after one or two weeks.

“Grownups are more likely to get sick than kids. Usually they just need to rest, and drink water, and take some medicine if they have a fever, and they will feel better soon, after one or two weeks.

“Sometimes when old people get coronavirus, they feel more sick. Their bodies are not as strong as younger peoples’ are, and they may need help from nurses and doctors in the hospital while their bodies rest and try to get rid of the virus.”

Things to Do to Stay Healthy

“It’s really important to do a couple things to help us not get sick, and to help the people around us stay healthy, too.

“We need to wash our hands well with soap and water, for 20 seconds. If we sing Happy Birthday twice while we wash our hands, it should be long enough to get rid of any germs our hands might have. We should wash our hands before we eat, after we eat, and after we go to the bathroom. If we go outside then when we come back inside we should wash our hands.

“Why is it important to wash our hands? So we don’t spread the coronavirus germs. This virus is contagious, which is a fancy word that means it can spread from one person to another. If your brother takes a bite of a hamburger, and he has coronavirus, some germs from his mouth might be on the burger. Then if you take a bite of the same burger, you might get his germs. If someone who has the virus coughs, the germs can spray out of their mouth on the air they are breathing out. They can land on someone standing close to them. This isn’t something to be afraid of, but to be careful about. It’s very important to cover your cough.”

Reassuring Your Child

Reassure your child about how you will help them if they do get sick (making them food, giving them medicine, taking them to the doctor if they need to go, which they probably won’t). Children feel better if they know you have a plan.

Reassure your child what you will do to take care of YOU if you get sick. (Rest a lot, drink lots of water, go to the doctor if you need to go, which you probably won’t.)

Children may want to know who will take care of them if something happens to the person who’s taking care of them. Tell your child who will watch them if you have to rest if you get sick. If you will be on your own, still watching your child while sick, as many will be, remind them that:

- you will stand farther apart from each other when you talk
- you will all keep washing your hands
- and if they get your germs and get sick, you will take care of them until they feel better.

Key Takeaways

- Germs are either unhealthy (like coronavirus) or healthy (like bacteria in yogurt). Not good or bad, nice or mean.
- They are alive the way plants are alive. They don’t have thoughts or feelings like people do.
- Most kids don’t get sick from coronavirus.
- When people get sick, they have a cough or a fever. They feel tired.
- You need to rest, drink water, and maybe take medicine if you are sick from coronavirus.
- We can protect ourselves by washing our hands with soap and water after we go to the bathroom, after we eat, or come in from outside, and before we eat, too. Sing happy birthday twice while you wash your hands to make sure it’s long enough.
- If you have a cough, cover your cough. We want to protect everyone else from germs, too.
- Coronavirus won’t live forever. Eventually, people will stop getting sick from it and it will be okay to go back to school.

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