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How Does the Omicron Variant Affect Kids and Babies?

by **Hallie Levine**+ [Medically Reviewed](#) by **Gina Posner, M.D., F.A.A.P.** on January 14, 2022

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If you're a parent of a baby or other children, here's what you need to know about the Omicron COVID-19 variant to keep your little ones healthy and safe.

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If you have a baby or other young children at home, you may be concerned about the latest rapid surge in COVID-19 cases driven by the Omicron variant.

what to expect.

While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) only announced the [first U.S. case of the Omicron variant](#) on December 1, 2021, it has now taken hold as the dominant strain in the country, already accounting for about 98 percent of total COVID-19 cases as of January 8, 2022.

"It's the most infectious virus we've seen since measles, with rates doubling every 48 to 72 hours," says [Rajeev Fernando, M.D.](#), an infectious diseases consultant at Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) field hospitals nationwide and a member of the [What to Expect Medical Review Board](#).

While COVID-19 infections are typically milder in kids and babies, the spread of the Omicron variant has correlated with a record number of pediatric cases and hospitalizations. Given the fact that the [COVID-19 vaccine](#) isn't yet authorized for use in children under the age of 5, it's understandable to worry about how the virus might affect your little ones. Here's what we know right now.

What are the symptoms of the Omicron variant in children?

The CDC states that [COVID-19 symptoms](#) can include:

- Fever
- Chills
- Cough
- Shortness of breath
- Fatigue
- New loss of taste or smell
- Muscle or body aches
- Headache
- Sore throat
- Congestion or runny nose
- Nausea
- Diarrhea

In general, you can expect symptoms of the Omicron variant to be very similar to those of the [Delta variant](#), says William Schaffner, M.D., an infectious disease specialist at Vanderbilt

University Medical Center in Nashville, Tennessee

what to expect.

An ongoing COVID symptom study in the United Kingdom found no clear differences between the early symptoms associated with the Delta and Omicron variants. However, people who tested positive for COVID-19 in an area with a higher prevalence of the Omicron strain reported these five symptoms most often:

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- Runny nose
- Headache
- Fatigue (either mild or severe)
- Sneezing
- Sore throat

Since these symptoms mimic those of the common cold, if your children experience any of them, you should get them tested for COVID-19 and isolate them until you get results, says

Robert McGregor, M.D., Chief Medical Officer of Akron Children's Hospital in Akron, Ohio.

what to expect.

Does the Omicron variant cause more severe disease in children?

Data on the Omicron variant is still emerging. Early data indicates that Omicron may affect people differently than previous strains and have a less severe impact on the lungs, but there's still more to learn.

Experts do know that the Omicron variant is highly contagious. Preliminary research has suggested that Omicron is more infectious than both the original COVID-19 virus and the Delta variant.

"The more contagious a virus is, the more likely it will spread," Fernando says. "If more children are infected with the Omicron variant, then more will develop severe illness."

In addition, since a pediatric COVID-19 vaccine was only approved for U.S. children in the 5-to-11 age group in November and some parents have waited to get their kids vaccinated, about 25 percent of kids in that group had received at least one dose as of January 5, according to the AAP's [vaccination in children trends report](#).

"We know that if you're not vaccinated, you're more vulnerable to infection, and to severe illness," Schaffner explains.

Can the Omicron variant cause croup?

[Croup](#) — a respiratory condition characterized by a harsh, barking cough — is one of the most common conditions seen at the pediatrician's office. And a number of different viruses, including COVID-19 and the flu, can cause this upper airway inflammation.

Researchers recorded COVID-19-related croup cases earlier on in the pandemic, but the recent surge of the Omicron variant has led to more numerous reports. Symptoms of croup include:

- Barking cough that sounds like a seal and usually worsens at night
- Hoarse, raspy voice
- Stuffy or runny nose
- Difficulty swallowing
- Irritability
- Fever
- Shortness of breath

what to expect.

The good news is that pediatricians have ample experience treating this disease. Your child's doctor may prescribe steroids, but the disease will often go away with the right home remedies, like using a humidifier, getting some fresh (cool) air outside and keeping your child hydrated.

Call the pediatrician if you notice any of the following signs:

- **Difficulty breathing**, especially during the day
- **Signs of dehydration**, like crying without tears and few wet diapers
- **Blueish or grayish hue** around your child's mouth, nose or fingernails
- **Stridor**, a high-pitched breathing sound, during the day, or nighttime stridor that doesn't promptly go away with exposure to steam or cold air
- **Retractions**, which is when the skin between the ribs pulls in with each breath
- **Coughing** that doesn't respond to suggested treatments

How can you protect your children from the Omicron variant?

There are a few steps you can take to help keep your family safe from COVID-19, including the Omicron variant:

Get vaccinated — and get your kids vaccinated if they're eligible

Children under 5 aren't yet eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine, but you can help protect them by being fully vaccinated yourself, Schaffner says. If your child is age 5 or older, get them vaccinated.

CDC data published in December reaffirmed that Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine caused mostly mild, brief side effects (like pain where the shot was given) in children ages 5 to 11. Millions of young kids have now received their shot, and serious adverse events were rarely reported.

Pfizer-BioNTech is also working on a new version of the COVID-19 vaccine that specifically targets the Omicron variant, which could be ready as soon as March. The CDC expects that the currently available vaccines will still offer insurance against hospitalization and serious illness.

"They're one of the best protections we have against the disease," Schaffner adds. While it's true that two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine may not always prevent infection, they do

what to expect.

Wear masks

Adults and children older than 2 should wear masks in public, especially indoors and around other people who are not in their household. The AAP also recommends that students and staff wear face masks at school and day care regardless of their vaccination status.

If your children will tolerate surgical masks — the best ones are KF94, N95 and KN95 masks — then those offer better protection than simple cloth ones, says John Swartzberg, M.D., clinical professor emeritus in the division of infectious diseases & vaccinology at the University of California Berkeley.

If they won't, opt for [cloth masks](#) that have layers. "The best protection is a surgical mask with a cloth one over it, but that may be hard for many kids to wear for longer periods of time," notes Swartzberg.

Be mindful of indoor settings

Crowded indoor spaces and those that do not have good air circulation are especially risky.

"It's a good idea to minimize indoor public places as much as possible," Schaffner advises. "Watch a movie at home instead of going to a movie theater, and spend time at an outdoor park instead of inside a children's museum or play area."

Test often

If you plan to spend time with anyone outside your household unmasked — like at a gathering with grandparents — then rapid testing of all guests the day of the event is a must, Schaffner says.

Even if you do that and every test comes back negative, it's still a good idea to wear masks if not everyone in the group is fully vaccinated and open windows if possible. Better yet, take the party outside and stick to outdoor gatherings in general if you can.

Avoid nonessential travel

Given Omicron's rapid spread, if you can put off travel plans right now, do so, Fernando says. If you must travel with little ones, take preventative measures such as wearing a mask (for those ages 2 and up) on public transportation and when in indoor settings, and getting tested before and after traveling.

Practice good hand hygiene

The whole family should be in the habit of washing their hands often with soap and water for

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If soap and water aren't available, adults can use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 60 percent alcohol; babies and toddlers should not use hand sanitizer.

Follow social distancing guidelines

Since some people without symptoms may be able to spread the virus, stay at least 6 feet (about two arm lengths) from other people, especially if your children are too young to get vaccinated.

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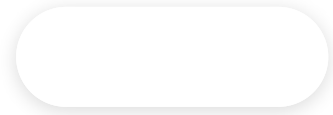
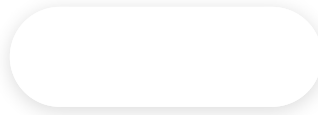
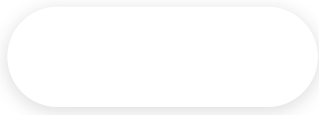
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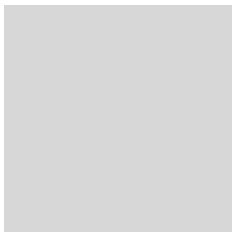
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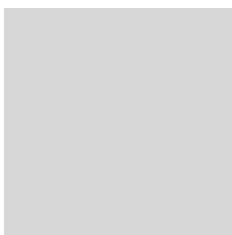
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