- Children—diseases

Warning signs

A GP TELLS LISA SALMON THE HEALTH RED FLAGS TO LOOK OUT FOR, AND WHEN TO CALL FOR HELP

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IT'S only natural for parents to worry about their children's health and fear the worst when they get a fever or a cough or other common childhood complaints.



All too often, they will search the internet for initial advice about how to deal with children's health issues – but this can open up a world of misinformation, warns GP Dr Nighat Arif.

In a bid to help people get the right advice about a myriad of both children's and adult's health problems, Dr Arif has written The Complete Guide to Family Health, and explains: "This is a perfect antidote to Dr Google or ChatGPT, and it came about because there was so much misinformation online. This is my underpinning of more than 15 years' worth of GP practice knowledge put into a book."

Here are some of the most common children's health problems parents may worry about, and Dr Arif's advice...

Head injury

Children bang their heads with alarming frequency, but it can be hard for parents to know when it's just a bump or something more serious. Dr Arif says head injuries aren't usually serious, but stresses: "Caution should be exercised with young children who can't communicate well how they feel. Bear in mind that there may be minimal visible damage but there could be bleeding or swelling in the brain that you can't see."

She says most children with head injuries will recover quickly within 24 to 48 hours, but stresses that parents should monitor them and not leave them alone. "Keep an eye on them because you're looking for concussion symptoms – that could be dizziness, loss of consciousness, vomiting, confusion, and severe headaches," she says. "With young children, look out for behavioural signs like being off their food, disinterest in toys or crying more than usual – go to A&E if you have any concerns."

Fever

Dr Arif points out that fevers are the body's response to infection, and while a temperature accompanied by other symptoms may indicate something more serious, she says in many cases a

fever is simply a healthy immune system reacting to an infection as it should. “It’s usually nothing to worry about,” she says.

In the book she stresses that if a baby under three months has a temperature above 38°C or below 36°C it’s a red flag situation where urgent medical attention is needed.

Generally, fever treatment depends on the age of the baby/child and the temperature, with a table in the book outlining what to do in various scenarios. But Dr Arif warns: “Fevers are more serious in babies. If you are worried, trust your instincts and go to your nearest hospital.”

Eczema

“I see a lot of eczema, it’s so common and it’s a bane on parents’ lives,” says Dr Arif. She suggests looking at a child’s diet to see if that could be causing the eczema. “Could there be something you’re giving them that’s allergic?” she asks, “because the skin is the largest organ we have, but the problem can be elsewhere. Don’t just sit on eczema, because it can be investigated further.”

If you are worried, trust your instincts and go to your nearest hospital

Dr Nighat Arif

Coughs

Dr Arif says red flags to look out for in children with a cough are: have they had a temperature that isn’t coming down, even when they’ve had paracetamol, and are they drinking enough fluids? So if they’re still in nappies, monitor how often they’re wet and whether it’s a normal amount.

She stresses that viral coughs don’t need antibiotics, and warns that some coughs can last two to three weeks. If a cough lasts longer than three weeks for children or adults, it’s worth seeing a doctor.

“Parents are so good with their gut feeling – it’s trying to reassure them to go with their gut,” she says. And the doctor, who has three boys herself, stresses that parents should never be worried about overreacting to their children’s symptoms. “I say to parents you’re just being vigilant – you’re doing the role you’re assigned to do.” The Complete Guide to Family Health by Dr Nighat Arif is published in hardback by Hamlyn, priced £22