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How to know when to take a child to the ER

(MEADOWBROOK, PA) – Each year, 23 million sick and injured children under the age of 15 are cared for in hospital emergency rooms. Recent reports from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention say that about 7,000 children are taken to the ER because they have either taken cough and cold medicines without supervision or have developed allergic reactions or other problems after taking the medications.

But what about the others? How do parents know when to take their children to the ER?

Dr. Henry Unger, chairman of Emergency Medicine at Holy Redeemer Hospital and Medical Center, says that it's not always easy to know when to simply call the pediatrician or when to take a child to the ER.

“As most parents know, determining whether or not to go to the emergency room can sometimes be confusing,” says Unger. “That’s because when a child is hurt, the situation always seems alarming. The easiest way for parents to know when to go to the ER is when they feel a severe injury or illness is threatening their child’s health or may cause permanent harm. In these cases, a child needs emergency medical treatment right away.”

Unger offers the following medical conditions that always require a visit to an emergency room with a child:

- **Trauma:** Burns, choking episodes, head injuries, electric shocks, poisoning, bleeding that doesn't stop or lacerations
- **Neurological problems:** Dizziness, weakness, sudden change in vision, lethargy, seizure, fainting or loss of consciousness, severe headache and/or neck pain with fever
- **Respiratory problems:** Shortness of breath, skin or lips that look blue, purple or gray, severe cough, wheezing

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- **Gastrointestinal problems:** Abdominal pain, persistent vomiting, excessive diarrhea
- **Orthopedic problems:** Possible broken bones, joint swelling, serious athletic injuries, disabling ankle or knee injuries

Unger says that it is important that infants receive medical attention if they have a fever, are crying inconsolably, have severe vomiting or diarrhea or have blood in their vomit or stool.

“It’s also important to watch for signs of dehydration with children of all ages,” says Unger. “Children need immediate medical treatment when they are dehydrated, the signs of which include crying with no tears, dry diapers for a 24-hour period, dry mouth, cracked lips, and listlessness. In these cases, the child should be brought to an emergency room for urgent evaluation.

“The ER is meant for emergencies, but I advise parents that it’s always better to be safe than sorry. If you think you are having a medical emergency, go to the ER. If you are not sure, call your pediatrician. If it’s after hours, your pediatrician should have an after-hours service or a nurse you can reach, but if you feel the problem cannot wait, go to the ER.”

Unger also advises parents to be familiar with basic first aid.

“Cleanse wounds with soap and water to avoid infection. Apply cool compresses to burns and irrigate with cool water any foreign materials which may get into your child’s eye. Apply pressure with a clean dressing to any wounds which are bleeding. If the emergency is serious, call 911.”

To find out more about Holy Redeemer’s emergency room services, or about Holy Redeemer physicians and programs, call 1-800-818-4747 or visit www.holyredeemer.com.