GoodHealthOutcomes.org
A Telehealth Company for Select Customers
1317 Edgewater Drive Suite 5236
Orlando, FL 32804
Voice 904.590.9598, Fax 317.342.5462
Email: Contact@GoodHealthOutcomes.org

Pediatric Red Flags: When to Seek Immediate Care

When evaluating the health of children, certain signs indicate a medical emergency or require rapid clinical evaluation. Because children can worsen more quickly than adults, it is crucial to recognize these warning signs early. If your child exhibits any of the following symptoms, do not wait for a telehealth visit. Seek immediate face-to-face emergency medical care or call 911.

Severe Respiratory Distress (Breathing Troubles)

Children's airways are small, and respiratory viruses or asthma can escalate quickly. Watch for physical signs of "air hunger":

- **Retractions:** The skin is pulling in tightly around the ribs, at the base of the throat, or under the breastbone when breathing.
- **Nasal Flaring:** The nostrils widen significantly with each breath.
- **Grunting or Wheezing:** Making a rhythmic grunting sound on expiration, or a high-pitched whistling sound.
- **Struggling to Speak:** An older child who is too breathless to talk, or an infant too breathless to feed.
- **Color Changes:** Bluish, pale, or gray coloring around the lips, tongue, or face.

Advanced Dehydration Signs

Dehydration can become dangerous rapidly, especially if a child is losing fluids from vomiting or diarrhea and cannot keep liquids down.

No Urine Output: No wet diapers for 8 hours or more in infants, or no urination for 8+ hours in older children.

No Tears: Crying without producing any tears.

Sunken Features: A noticeably sunken soft spot (fontanelle) on an infant's head, or sunken, dark eyes.

Lethargy: The child is excessively drowsy, floppy, or difficult to wake up to drink.

Critical Fever Thresholds

Fever is a normal response to infection, but the child's age determines when a fever becomes an automatic red flag:

- **Neonates (Under 2 Months Old):** Any rectal temperature over 100.4°F (38°C) is a medical emergency requiring immediate hospital evaluation. Do not give fever reducers before seeing a doctor.
- **Unresponsive Fever:** A high fever in an older child that does not come down even after proper doses of acetaminophen or ibuprofen, especially if accompanied by extreme lethargy.
- **Fever with a Stiff Neck or Rash:** A fever paired with a stiff neck, extreme light sensitivity, or a new purple/red spotty rash that does not fade when you press a glass against it (non-blanching rash).

Neurological & Behavioral Changes

A sudden shift in a child's mental state or neurological function requires an immediate in-person exam.

- **Altered Mental Status:** Inconsolable, high-pitched crying; extreme irritability that cannot be soothed; or unusual confusion and disorientation.
- **Lethargy:** Being weak, unresponsive, or refusing to interact or make eye contact.
- **Seizures:** New-onset seizures or a seizure associated with a rapid spike in fever (febrile seizure).
- **Sudden Weakness:** Inability to stand, walk, or hold objects normally.

Severe Abdominal Pain or Persistent Vomiting

- **Localized Pain:** Sharp, severe pain, particularly if it settles in the lower right side of the abdomen (a warning sign for appendicitis).
- **Inability to Keep Fluids Down:** Persistent vomiting for more than 12–24 hours that prevents any oral rehydration.
- **Abnormal Vomit Color:** Vomit that is bright green/bilious, or contains blood (looks like dark coffee grounds).

Practical Tip for Parents

While waiting to see a provider or en route to care, maintain a precise log of when symptoms started, how many wet diapers or fluid ounces the child has had, and the exact times and dosages of any fever medications given.

The above information was reviewed and validated by David Campbell-O'Dell, DNP, APRN-IP, FNP-BC, FAANP