When to Call the Doctor

Many parents don’t want to call the pediatric primary care provider unless they have a powerful reason—like an obvious medical emergency. Many parents feel too intimidated to ask questions or express concerns on the phone, or they may feel that they should not “bother” the physician or office staff with calls outside of visits. But all parents may have concerns about medical issues or their child’s development. This is normal. Asking for help and information is the sign of a great parent.

Suggestions that may help you decide when to call the doctor or nurse practitioner:

- It is a good idea to call if your child’s behavior is different from usual and worries you, especially if you suspect she is unwell.
- It’s all right to call if you notice that your child looks different from usual to you. For example, if you notice a skin irritation or rash.

In addition, you should call your doctor or nurse practitioner if your baby:

- Runs a fever over 100.4 degrees
- Has diarrhea for two or more bowel movements (different from your baby’s normal) or bloody stools
- Vomiting that goes far distances (“projectile vomiting”)
- Trouble breathing, coughing
- Refuses several feedings in a row or eats poorly, or gets out of breath with feedings
- Fewer than 2 wet diapers in a day or a dry-appearing mouth
- Shows significant changes in behavior or mood
- Is hard to awaken or is unusually sleepy or floppy
- Has a tender, red, or irritated-looking navel or penis as this could be a sign of serious infection
- Has been crying a lot or is difficult to soothe
- Other symptoms of concern, or a gut feeling something is wrong

Some things to think about:

- Ask your pediatric primary care providers how they feel about addressing parental concerns between visits. What’s the best way to reach the office during office hours and in the evenings or on weekends? Are these numbers posted in your home?
- Does the practice have a call-in or question line? If not, how can you access advice after hours?
- Know your insurance company’s policy for handling medical emergencies. You may have to contact your primary care doctor first.
- It’s better to ask questions and to get reassurance than to be home and worried. Moms and dads make many decisions every day about the care of their child. It can be helpful to discuss options so that you can make the best choice for your child and family.