

Now that a new school year is upon us there are a few things you can do to make it a healthy year for your child. Below, Community Care Physicians' Wellness Concierge, Susan Gauthier, offers parents and other caregivers some tips on how to minimize the spread of germs and keep children of all ages healthy and safe. Community Care Physicians Wellness Concierge service offers educational materials and advice on disease and prevention, links to specialty services, support groups and classes, travel medicine services and internet access and assistance to health related websites. Susan Gauthier's office is located at the Capital Region Health Park, 711 Troy-Schenectady Road, Latham (783-3110 extension 3347).

Encouraging your child to wash their hands is a message worth repeating. Hand washing is by far the best way to prevent germs from spreading and to keep your kids from getting sick.

Teach your child to wash his hands often, especially after using the bathroom and before eating. Hand washing is one of the most effective ways to prevent the transmission of disease, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Germs, such as bacteria and viruses, can be transmitted several different ways:

- contact with contaminated water and food
- exposure to droplets released during a cough or a sneeze,
- contact with a sick person's body fluids
- through dirty hands and contact with contaminated surfaces

If your child picks up germs from one of these sources, simply touching his eyes, nose, or mouth can unknowingly infect him. Once he's infected, it's usually just a matter of time before the whole family comes down with the same illness.

Good hand washing is your first line of defense against the spread of many illnesses - including the common cold. More serious illnesses such as meningitis, influenza, and most types of infectious diarrhea can be stopped with the simple act of washing your hands.

To minimize the germs passed around your family, make frequent hand washing a rule for everyone, especially children. Don't underestimate the power of hand washing! The few seconds you spend at the sink could very well save you a trip to the doctor's office.

Eating properly will help your child stay healthy. Breakfast is still the most important meal because it provides the fuel children need for school and play during the early part of the day. It breaks the fast of the sleep hours and prepares the child for the learning period at school. Children who eat breakfast are more alert, energetic and creative, and they perform better in school than children who skip the meal. To make mornings less hectic, set out dishes and non-perishable items the night before. If your child does not want to sit down to breakfast, have quick, portable breakfast foods available, such as nutritious granola bars, fresh fruit, and 100% fruit juices and milk.

Pack a lunch for them or guide them on what to choose at school. Encourage them to eat fruits and vegetables and to avoid soda, which contains too much sugar and frequently caffeine. Make sandwiches with whole- wheat bread and avoid using margarine and butter. Stock the refrigerator and cupboards with healthy snacks such as yogurt, fruit cups, 100% fruit juice, fresh fruit, cut up raw vegetables and pretzels. Set a good nutritional example when you make your own lunch or snack. Make sure **you** take the time to eat breakfast too. Dinner can be a hectic time, but encourage family members to sit and enjoy a meal together. This is a good time for everyone to share his or her day with each other. Getting at least nine hours of restful sleep each night is critical for children's health, success in school and other activities, and safety. That's the message from the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI). Getting enough sleep each night is very important for children; it will help them feel good and have more fun during the day. Sleep problems are estimated to affect about 70 million Americans, and there is a growing body of scientific evidence showing that inadequate sleeps results in tiredness, difficulties with focused attention, irritability and easy frustration. This is as true for children as it is for adults.

