

# on call

## toddlers with impetigo

**Q** I was told that a toddler in my son's play group has impetigo and that it's very contagious. What else should I know about it?

Impetigo is a very common and usually benign skin infection. It is most commonly caused by the bacteria streptococcus (strep) and staphylococcus (staph). Methicillin Resistant Staph Aureus (MRSA) is also a common cause. While it's normal for the skin surface to populate with a host of bacteria, sometimes a break in the skin allows bacteria to gain entry and grow into infections. Impetigo is notable for single, possibly multiple, itchy blisters. Some blisters fill with clear yellow fluid, while others fill with pus and easily break open to form crusted-over, scabbed lesions. Lesions are very common on the face, lips, arms and legs, and can easily spread to other areas through direct contact with the infected fluid from the lesions. Good hand washing and taking precautions to avoid contact with contaminated towels and clothing greatly reduces the person to person transmission risk. To reduce the chance of spread and scarring, keep the lesions clean and discourage scratching. Diagnoses are made based on the appearance of the lesions and cultures of the pus are sometimes needed to exclude MRSA. Treatment includes topical antibacterial creams as well as oral antibiotics in some cases. If you believe your child has impetigo, visit your pediatrician to learn more about treatment options.



## nail biting children

**Q** How can I get my 8-year-old daughter to stop biting and tearing her fingernails?

Nail biting (onychophagia) is a very common and often frustrating issue for parents. About half of all children bite their nails at some point. Tearing at the nails or picking at them follows similar patterns as biting. Thankfully, while nail-biting is unsanitary, it is unlikely to cause long-term nail damage. It can, of course, contribute to skin infections and increase the rates of colds by spreading germs from the hands to the mouth. In children, nail biting is one of many benign nervous habits such as hair pulling or twirling, fidgeting, thumb sucking, or nose picking. In some children it can be a sign of more serious anxiety issues. Children may bite their nails more often when they are having problems at school, home or with friends, so talk with your child about stressors. They are more likely to stop biting their nails when they understand what may have triggered the behavior. Multiple therapies exist to quit the habit, including designating only one finger to bite; keeping the nails painted or applying fake nails; painting the nails with a harmless, bitter polish like Bitrex, Control-It or Thum; offering the child a distraction to play with; putting Band-Aids or stickers on the nails; or chewing gum instead of the nails. Offering your child nail-biting alternatives may lead to faster cessation of the behavior.