

Diarrhoea & Vomiting in Children (Gastroenteritis)

What is gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis is an infection of the gut which causes diarrhoea (runny, watery poo) and sometimes vomiting. The vomiting often settles down quickly, but the diarrhoea may continue up to 2 weeks.

Gastroenteritis is a very common illness in childhood. It is sometimes called a 'tummy bug'. Most children will have several bouts during childhood.

It can be caused by many germs, although the most common cause is a viral infection. Most children do not need any medicines to treat gastroenteritis and it will get better by itself.

Signs and symptoms

- Gastroenteritis causes your child to feel unwell and not want to eat or drink
- Vomiting may happen in the first 24 to 72 hours
- Diarrhoea may follow and can last up to 2 weeks
- Your child may have some stomach pains
- Your child may also have a fever

Care at home

- Children with mild gastroenteritis can be looked after at home.
- The main treatment is to keep your child drinking fluids often. This is needed to replace fluid lost due to the vomiting and diarrhoea. It is important for the fluids to be taken even if the diarrhoea seems to get worse.
- Do not give medicines to reduce the vomiting and diarrhoea. They do not work and may be harmful.
- Your baby or child is infectious so wash your hands well with soap and warm water, particularly before feeding and after changing nappies.
- Do not share towels or flannels.
- Keep your child away from other children as much as possible until the diarrhoea has stopped.
- Your child should not go to school or any other childcare facility, but they can return 48 hours after the last episode of diarrhoea or vomiting.

What fluids should I give?

- Give fluid "little and often". This usually means sips of fluids every few minutes. This way the child takes a lot of fluid over time but never has a full tummy e.g. about 5ml every 5 minutes.
- The best fluid is 'oral rehydration solution' (such as Dioralyte). This contains added sugars and salts to replace those being lost. Dioralyte does not taste very nice so some children may not drink it, you may add a little juice (squash) to it for flavour and it tastes best when cold (make some up and keep in the fridge).
- Plain water/juice is an alternative (but should not be used alone for more than 24h)
- Avoid sugary drinks (including flat 'coke')

- Breast fed infants should **continue** to be breast-fed
- For bottle fed babies milk feeds should be reintroduced after a few hours of water or dioralyte. If this is not tolerated, then continue with juice / dioralyte, and retry milk after 4-6 hours. Continue to retry milk every few hours.
- Your child may refuse food at first. This is not a problem as long as clear fluids are taken.
- Reintroduce foods slowly when vomiting has settled starting with plain foods e.g. toast, biscuits, pasta, soup etc.

Seeking help

If you are concerned about your child or if any of the problems listed below develop, then you must seek help.

- Children under 6 months are at an increased risk from dehydration, and seeking help early in these children is sensible
- Bloody Diarrhoea or diarrhoea for longer than 10 days
- If there is any green vomit
- For younger children, no wet nappies for 12 hours
- For older children, not passing urine for 12 hours
- For all children, failure to tolerate **any** fluid, with on-going diarrhoea and vomiting or severe abdominal pain
- If you think your child is dehydrated
- Temperature over 39 degrees
- If your child is unusually irritable or lethargic

Medical treatment

- Antibiotics are rarely given because they have no effect on the infection, and may make diarrhoea worse.
- The aim of treatment is to support the child by preventing dehydration ('losing too much fluid')
- If your child is very dehydrated and cannot keep any fluids down they may need to be admitted to hospital to have blood tests, and to have fluids via a tube through the nose into the stomach (called a nasogastric or NG tube), or directly into the vein by intravenous therapy.

Key points

- Children will usually recover with no specific treatment over a few days
- It may take up to 2 weeks to be completely back to normal
- Gastroenteritis is infectious. It is important for you and members of your family to wash your hands when you have been handling or have been in contact with your child

Contact numbers

For further advice about your child's condition contact:

- Your GP or Practice Nurse
- NHS Direct 0845 46 47

References

- NICE Clinical Guideline 84: Diarrhoea & Vomiting in Children Under 5
- The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne: Gastroenteritis