

Vomiting and Diarrhea: Helping Your Child Through Sickness

What causes vomiting and diarrhea?

Vomiting (throwing up) and diarrhea (frequent, watery bowel movements) can be caused by viruses, bacteria, parasites, foods that are hard to digest and other things.

Can vomiting and diarrhea be dangerous for children?

They can be. Vomiting and diarrhea can be harmful to children because they can cause dehydration. Dehydration occurs when too much fluid is lost from the body. Young babies can become dehydrated quickly. But dehydration can occur in a child of any age.

Signs of dehydration

- Irritability
- Not eating as well as usual
- Weight loss
- Not urinating ("peeing") as often as usual
- Urine that is darker than usual
- Fast heartbeat
- Dry mouth
- Thirst (babies may show thirst by crying and being irritable and eager to drink when something is offered)
- Sunken eyes
- No tears when crying
- Sunken soft spot in babies younger than 18 months
- Skin that isn't as springy as usual

How can I prevent dehydration?

If your child has had several bouts of vomiting or diarrhea, he or she will need to drink fluids to replace those lost with vomiting and diarrhea. Encourage your older child (older than 2) to drink water and other clear fluids. Ask your doctor about giving your baby or toddler an oral rehydration solution (ORS), which contains the right mix of salt, sugar, potassium and other elements to help replace lost body fluids.

What can I give my older child to drink?

Children older than 2 can have drinks such as apple juice, chicken broth, sports drinks (Gatorade) or tea. Drinks that have caffeine in them shouldn't be given because caffeine increases the amount of water and salt the body loses.

Should I give my child ORS?

If your child is under age 2 and/or you're worried that he or she is dehydrated, ask your doctor about using ORS. ORS comes as a powder that you mix with water, a liquid that is already mixed and as frozen popsicles. Brands of ORS include Pedialyte and Ricelyte.

How should I give ORS if my child is vomiting?

If your child is vomiting, wait a couple of hours after the last time he or she vomited, and then give him or her a few sips of ORS. If your child keeps vomiting, wait another hour or two.

Try giving him or her small amounts of ORS often, such as 1 teaspoonful every few minutes. When your child is able to keep the drink down, slowly increase how much you give. Small amounts every few minutes may stay down better than a large amount all at once.

When your child stops vomiting, you may increase how much ORS you give each time and lengthen the time between when you give ORS to 3 to 4 hours. Keep giving ORS until your child stops vomiting.

How should I give ORS if my child has diarrhea?

If your child has diarrhea and isn't vomiting, give him or her ORS freely. Your doctor may ask you to keep track of how much your child drinks. You can use a dropper, a spoon or a medicine cup to keep track.

Should I feed my child when he or she has diarrhea?

Yes. Even though eating may cause the amount of diarrhea to increase, your child will be able to get some nutrients from the food. This may prevent your child from losing too much weight and help your child get better quicker.

Breast-fed babies. If you are breast-feeding, keep breast-feeding while you're giving ORS.

Formula-fed babies. If you've been giving your baby formula, some doctors suggest switching from formula to ORS for up to 12 to 24 hours and then switching back to giving formula. Talk to your doctor about what to do.

Children on food. Children should begin eating within 12 to 24 hours after starting to take ORS. Avoid foods with a lot of sugar and fat, such as ice cream, gelatin, pudding and fried foods.

If your child has had diarrhea, it's best to avoid dairy products for 3 to 7 days.

Sometimes bland foods are recommended for the first 24 hours. Bland foods include bananas, rice, applesauce, toast and unsweetened cereals. If these foods don't bother your child, you can add other foods over the next 48 hours. Most children can return to normal eating habits about 3 days after the vomiting and/or diarrhea stop.

Should I give my child medicine to stop diarrhea?

This usually isn't needed. Diarrhea doesn't usually last long. If it's caused by an infection, diarrhea is a way for the body to get rid of the infection. Giving medicines that stop diarrhea may interfere with the body's efforts to heal. Antibiotics are usually not necessary either. Talk to your family doctor if you think your child needs medicine.

Will my child need to go to the hospital?

Probably not, unless the dehydration is severe. In this case, your child may need to be given fluids intravenously (through an IV) to replace fluids lost through vomiting or diarrhea. Call your doctor if you notice any of the signs in the box below.

Call your doctor if your child is vomiting or has diarrhea and:

- Is younger than 6 months old.
- Is older than 6 months old and has a fever higher than 101.4°F.
- Has signs of dehydration (see list above).
- Has been vomiting longer than 8 hours or is vomiting with great force.
- Has stools that are bloody or slimy.
- Has blood or green slime in the vomit.
- Hasn't passed urine in 8 hours.
- Could have swallowed something that could be a poison.
- Has a stiff neck.
- Is listless or unusually sleepy.
- Has had abdominal pain for more than 2 hours.

Can I help prevent vomiting and diarrhea in my children?

Vomiting and diarrhea may be caused by foods that are hard for your child to digest, such as sugar. Make sure your child eats a healthy diet and avoids too many sweets.

Most infections that cause diarrhea are caused by a virus found in feces. Help prevent infection by disposing of dirty diapers properly, and by washing your hands after changing a diaper or going to the bathroom.