

# Looking after your child with gastroenteritis

## What is gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis is an infection of the bowel (intestines) that causes diarrhoea and sometimes vomiting. It is common in infants and children. Diarrhoea and vomiting sometimes cause the loss of important fluids and minerals the body needs (dehydration).

## What causes gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis is more common in the winter and early spring. Viruses that get into the intestinal tract (bowels) usually cause infection. Sometimes bacteria cause it. They are picked up by putting dirty hands, toys or other objects into the mouth.

## What are the symptoms of gastroenteritis?

The most common **symptoms** are

- diarrhoea (frequent, loose, watery stools) usually lasting 2-7 days
- nausea and vomiting lasting 1-2 days
- abdominal/stomach pain
- a runny nose and fever

## What can I do if my infant or child has gastroenteritis?

Usually, diarrhoea and vomiting last only a short time. Therefore, most children can be looked after at home.

## If your child has diarrhoea but is otherwise well

No special drinks or treatments are needed. Feeding children normally will not make things worse and they may get better faster. Extra drinks will replace the fluid they are losing. Water flavoured with a little diluting fruit squash is probably best.

- **Avoid** giving natural fruit juices, fizzy drinks (even if “flat”), or sports drinks. They contain sugars that may make diarrhoea worse
- If you are breast-feeding, continue to feed on demand but give extra drinks of cooled boiled water between breast feeds.
- If your infant is bottle-fed, continue feeding as usual with full-strength formula.
- Foods such as rice, potatoes, bread and cereals, lean meat, yoghurt, fruits and vegetables are best. Avoid sugary or fatty foods.

## Are there any special treatments?

If diarrhoea continues or becomes worse, give your child **oral rehydration solutions (ORS)** such as Rehydrat<sup>TM</sup> or Dioralyte<sup>TM</sup>. They are specially designed drinks to replace fluids and body salts lost in gastroenteritis. They are available from chemists or by prescription from your family doctor.

- Some children do not like the taste of ORS drinks. Children who are dehydrated rarely refuse ORS.
- Offer small amounts frequently – perhaps 5-10 ml sips every few minutes

## How long should I give my child ORS?

Generally after 4 hours, other fluids, including milk and food can be given.

## What if my child keeps vomiting?

Vomiting is a common early symptom of gastroenteritis. Most children with vomiting and diarrhoea can be treated at home with ORS. The trick is to give very small amounts very frequently. Give 5 ml using a medicine syringe every 2 - 3 minutes. If this is not tolerated because of vomiting contact your doctor.

As the vomiting improves, you can increase the amount of ORS that you give and give it less often.

## What treatments are not helpful?

Medicines to treat vomiting or diarrhoea, or antibiotics are usually not necessary or helpful.

## How can I treat nappy rash caused by diarrhoea?

- Generally avoid nappy wipes
- Cleanse the nappy area gently and *thoroughly* with soap and water; pat dry
- Apply zinc-based nappy cream such as Sudocrem thickly after cleansing bottom *gently* and *thoroughly*
- Wash hands well after each nappy change

## When should I call my doctor?

### Call your doctor if you are worried that your child is becoming dehydrated:

Sometimes vomiting, diarrhoea, fever and loss of appetite can make your child lose more fluid than he can or she can keep down. This may lead to dehydration. Signs or symptoms are:

- Dry mouth
- Sunken eyes
- Excessive thirst
- No urine in 8 to 12 hours or small amounts of dark urine
- Frequent napping, sleeping more and longer than usual
- No tears with crying

### Call your doctor if:

- Your baby is less than six months old
- Your child keeps vomiting, (especially if bright green or brown) and cannot keep fluids down
- Your child's motion contains blood
- You can't get fluids into the child and diarrhoea lasts longer than 24 hours
- You can get fluids into the child but diarrhoea lasts more than 7-10 days
- Your child continues to have many watery motions a day
- Your child has on going tummy pains

**Disclaimer:** This information should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your doctor. You should always contact your doctor if you are worried about your child's health. Your own doctor may recommend other treatments based on your child's individual circumstances.