



## Leaflet: Gastroenteritis in Children

# Gastroenteritis in Children

Gastroenteritis occurs when the guts (intestines) become infected. Many bacteria, viruses and other microbes (germs) can cause it. It can range from a mild upset tummy for a day or two with some mild diarrhoea to severe vomiting and diarrhoea for several days or longer.

## What are the symptoms of gastroenteritis ?

- ◆ Sometimes vomiting is the main symptom. Sometimes it is diarrhoea. Sometimes it is both.
- ◆ Crampy pains in the abdomen (tummy) are common. Pains may ease each time some diarrhoea is passed.
- ◆ High temperatures (fever) and headaches are common.

If vomiting occurs, it typically lasts a day or so. Diarrhoea often starts after any vomiting and may last several days. Loose motions (stools) can persist for a week or so before a normal pattern returns. See below for symptoms of complications.

## How do you get gastroenteritis?

Sometimes it is caused from infected food (food poisoning). Sometimes it is just 'one of those bugs going about'. Infected water is a cause in some countries. Good hygiene helps prevent spread to other people. Children should be helped to wash their hands after going to the toilet. Adults changing babies nappies should wash their hands afterwards.

## What is the treatment for gastroenteritis?

- ◆ *Drinks* - give the child lots to drink. This is the most important part of treatment. The aim is to avoid dehydration. Even if the child vomits or feels sick it is important to give frequent sips as some fluid will still be absorbed. Ideally, fruit juices should be included as these have some sugar in them. However, any drink is better than none. If the child will only drink their favourite drink then that is fine.
- ◆ *Rehydration drinks* - may be advised. They are used if there is a concern about dehydration. They can be given instead of, or in addition to, normal drinks. They are made from sachets available from pharmacies. For example, Dioralyte, Rehidrat, and Electrolade are common brands and come in different flavours. Rehydration drinks provide a perfect balance of water, salt and sugar. They are better than just drinking water alone. The small amount of sugar and salt added from the sachets helps the water to be absorbed better into the body from the gut. They do not stop or reduce diarrhoea but are the best drinks to prevent or treat dehydration. Make up these drinks exactly as instructed on the packet. Home made salt drinks are not advised as the quantity of salt has to be exact to be of benefit and to avoid problems.
- ◆ *Food and milk feeds* - do not starve a child with gastroenteritis. This used to be advised but is now known to be wrong. The child should eat as normally as possible. However, if he or she does not want to eat, take milk or breast feed, then that is fine. Drinks are the most important and food can wait until the appetite returns. Once vomiting is settling, offer some food or a milk feed every now and then. If the child is old enough for solids then salty soups (to replace salt lost in diarrhoea) and food high in carbohydrate such as bread, crackers and pasta are best to start with. A returning appetite is a good sign of recovery. A child may vomit if he or she eats too much at first but this should only be a temporary setback if their appetite remains.
- ◆ *Breast fed babies* - should continue to breast feed if they will take it. This is in addition to extra rehydration drinks if they are advised. Bottle fed babies should be fed with full strength milk if they will take it. Again, this is in addition to extra rehydration drinks if advised.
- ◆ *Medicines* to stop vomiting or diarrhoea should never be given to young children. They sound attractive remedies but they are unsafe to give to children due to possible complications.
- ◆ *Paracetamol* - (Calpol, Disprol, etc) is useful to ease fever (high temperatures), headaches or stomach pains. These symptoms are quite common with gastroenteritis.

## Are there any complications?

Most children with gastroenteritis recover quickly. Vomiting usually settles within 1 to 2 days but diarrhoea may last for longer. Dehydration is the most common complication but is unlikely to occur if the child drinks. Dehydration may be developing if the child drinks little, passes little urine, becomes drowsy with a dry mouth and tongue. See a doctor if you suspect dehydration is developing. The following symptoms may also indicate a more serious illness.

- ◆ Persistent vomiting.
- ◆ Blood in vomit or diarrhoea.
- ◆ Diarrhoea not beginning to settle after several days.
- ◆ Pains getting worse.
- ◆ Drowsiness or confusion.
- ◆ Infections caught abroad.

See a doctor if these or any other symptoms occur that you are concerned about.

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