

Abdominal pain in children

Emergency Department factsheets



What is abdominal pain?

Abdominal pain is pain or cramping anywhere in the abdomen (sometimes called a tummy, belly or stomach ache). Children often complain of abdominal pain. It is one of the most common reasons children come to the emergency department.

Most cases of abdominal pain are not serious and children often get better by themselves.

What causes abdominal pain?

There are many things that can cause abdominal pain.

- Bowel problems.
- Infections, such as gastroenteritis (which causes vomiting and diarrhoea/runny faeces or poo) or urine infections.
- Food related – too much food, food poisoning or food allergies and intolerances.
- Surgical problems, such as appendicitis or a bowel obstruction.
- Period pain – some girls can also have monthly pain before or during their period.

Treatment

Abdominal pain can be hard to diagnose. Often the cause is not apparent and the symptoms may take some time to become obvious. Sometimes tests are useful to help with a diagnosis. They may include:

- blood tests
- a urine test
- a stool (faeces or poo) sample
- x-rays of the abdomen
- ultrasound.

Some results may take a number of days to

come back. Your local doctor will receive a letter advising them how to obtain the test results, or a hospital appointment will be made for you to return to get the test results (in the emergency department).

Treatment may be as simple as going home to rest, drink fluids, eat a bland diet and take simple pain medication (eg paracetamol) as required. At other times, your child may be admitted to hospital or may need an operation (surgery).

Home care

There are some general ways to ease your child's pain.

- Ensure your child gets plenty of rest.
- Help your child drink plenty of clear fluids, such as water, dilute cordial/juice, or an oral hydration solution (eg Gastrolyte/Hydralyte). Getting your child to drink is most important as it prevents dehydration (loss of water).
- If your child is hungry let them eat what they want or offer bland food such as crackers, rice, bananas or toast. Do not force your child to eat if they feel unwell. They will start eating when they feel better.
- Rubbing a child's tummy, using a heat pack or having a distraction, such as reading a book, can sometimes ease the pain.
- Give paracetamol if your child is in pain or is miserable. Carefully check the label for the correct dose and make sure you are not giving your child any other products containing paracetamol. Only give as directed. Do not give your child aspirin.

What to expect

Many children with abdominal pain get better quickly, without any treatment and often no cause can be found.

Sometimes the cause becomes more obvious with time. This is why it is important to see your local doctor for follow-up or return to the emergency department if symptoms are getting worse.

Repeated attacks of abdominal pain

Some children have repeated attacks of abdominal pain, which can be very worrying for parents. Often no health problem can be found. Children may have abdominal pain when they are worried or experiencing stress.

Think about whether there is anything that is upsetting your child at home, school or with friends.

See your local doctor for advice. A referral may be needed to a paediatrician (a doctor who specialises in children) or gastroenterologist (a doctor who specialises in tummy problems).

Follow-up

If pain or other problems persist for more than 24 hours, take your child to your local doctor. See your local doctor or health care professional as soon as possible if your child:

- has severe pain (despite pain medication) or the pain has moved
- has a fever (temperature over 38°C)
- is pale, sweaty and unwell
- is refusing to drink fluids
- is vomiting for more than 24 hours and not keeping fluids down, or their vomit is green in colour
- has blood in their vomit or faeces (poo)
- has problems passing urine or not done a wee (less than four wet nappies a day)
- pain or lumps in their groin
- a skin rash which is sore or painful
- has had a recent injury (for example, falling onto bike handle bars)
- or if you are concerned for any other reason.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

For other medical problems see your local doctor or health-care professional.

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and triage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider

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