

Gastroenteritis in children

Emergency Department factsheets



What is gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis (often called 'gastro') is the inflammation of the stomach and intestines. It is a common infection that can cause diarrhoea (runny faeces or poo), vomiting and abdominal pain. Gastroenteritis can cause dehydration (loss of water), which sometimes results in a loss of sugar and salts that the body needs to work normally.

Babies under six months of age are most at risk. They can become ill very quickly because of loss of fluid.

The most common cause of gastro is a virus, which tends to spread very easily and is not helped by antibiotics. Bacteria and food poisoning are less common causes of gastro.

Symptoms

Gastroenteritis often starts with feeling unwell and refusing to eat or drink. Vomiting and then diarrhoea follows. Diarrhoea may last up to 10 days. The motions are frequent, loose, and watery. Your child may cry through hunger, thirst, fever or pain. They may want to sleep more. Some children have cramping tummy pain.

Treatment

Gastroenteritis can be mild and treatment will often depend on the type of gastro. Most children recover with simple, supportive treatment at home.

The most important treatment of gastro is to replace body fluids which have been lost and to ensure your child can take in enough fluid to prevent them becoming dehydrated.

- Offer your child small amounts (a few sips at a time) of clear fluids. The fluids will not stop

the vomiting and diarrhoea, but will stop your child becoming dehydrated. It is important to give fluids, even if the diarrhoea gets worse. Make sure your child has plenty of rest.

- Do not give your child medication to stop the vomiting or diarrhoea unless ordered by your doctor.

What are 'clear fluids'

Oral rehydration solutions (such as Gastrolyte, Pedialyte or Repalyte) are the best fluid as they replace the water, sugar and body salts lost due to vomiting and diarrhea. Hydralyte icy-poles, half-strength apple juice are an alternative. You can buy them from the chemist or supermarket. Follow the instructions on the packet.

Avoid giving fizzy drinks or full strength fruit juice as this may worsen the diarrhoea.

What if I am breastfeeding?

Do not stop breastfeeding. Give your baby smaller feeds more often and offer oral rehydration solution, or cooled, boiled water between feeds if your baby is under nine months of age.

What if my baby is bottle-fed?

- Give your child oral rehydration solution for the first 12–24 hours of symptoms. Use cooled boiled water to dilute oral rehydration solutions for babies less than nine months of age.
- Do not stop formulae for more than 12-24 hours.
- If there is no vomiting or diarrhoea after 12 hours, introduce full-strength formula in smaller, frequent amounts.

- DO NOT dilute formula. This is not helpful, and may be harmful.

Children can eat their usual foods

- If your child is hungry at any time, give them the food they would normally eat or something they feel like eating. Avoid fatty or spicy food. Sometimes bland foods such as bananas, rice, toast or dry biscuits are better tolerated by your child.
- Do not force your child to eat if they are vomiting frequently or feeling unwell. They will start to eat when they feel better.
- Your child should be back on normal fluids and diet in 48–72 hours, even if diarrhoea continues. This will make your child better quicker.

Stopping the spread of gastroenteritis

- Make sure that you and your family wash hands well with warm soapy water after changing nappies, cleaning up vomit, using the toilet and before eating.
- Wipe things that may be shared between children, such as books and toys.
- Keep your child away from other children while they are unwell.
- Do not send your child to school, kindergarten, child care or crèche until 24 hours after the last vomiting and diarrhoea.
- Do not let your children share drinks or food or use the same cutlery.

Follow-up

Your child may be dehydrated and need a check-up by your local doctor if they have one or more of these signs:

- sunken eyes
- lethargy (sleepiness)
- dry mouth and tongue
- cold hands and feet
- patchy/mottled/blotchy or pale skin
- passing little or no urine (nappies are dry or less than four wet nappies a day)
- not drinking and still has frequent vomiting, diarrhoea or both
- blood in the bowel motions
- diarrhoea continues for more than 7 days
- you are worried for any other reason.

Seeking help

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

See your local doctor or health care professional if your child:

- has any sign of dehydration (see 'Follow-up')
- is younger than six months
- has tummy pain that is getting worse
- has blood or mucous in their diarrhoea
- has more than eight to ten bowel motions (diarrhoea) in a day, or diarrhoea lasting 7 days or more
- you are worried for any other reason.

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

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage 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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