

Information about

Gastroenteritis In Children

What is Gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis, often called “gastro”, is an infection of the gut that causes diarrhoea and is often associated with vomiting, fever and abdominal pain. It is a common illness that is infectious and easily spread. It tends to be more serious in babies and small children as they are more likely to become dehydrated.

What causes Gastroenteritis?

It is usually caused by viruses, the most common being Rotavirus. Sometimes other types of germs including bacteria and parasites may also cause gastroenteritis. Rotavirus is less common in older children and adults and other viruses such as Norovirus may be responsible.

How is it spread?

It is most commonly spread by contact with another person with the illness. Some infections can also be spread from contaminated food and water.

Gastroenteritis is highly infectious so your child should not attend school, day-care or kindergarten while they are sick or while they still have diarrhoea.

Good hand washing with soap and water before food preparation and eating; and after going to the toilet, changing nappies, and handling any ill person is important in helping to stop the spread of infection.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Vomiting often occurs at the start of the illness and may last 2-3 days. Diarrhoea, which is often runny may last up to 10 days. Your child may also have a fever and abdominal (tummy) pains with the illness.

You should see a doctor if your child is:

- very young or small (aged below 6 months or weighs less than 8 kg)
- born preterm, or has other chronic conditions
- passing any blood in the stool
- having dark green (bile) vomits
- having severe abdominal pain
- less than 3 years old and has a fever more than 38.5°C
- passing less than 4 wet nappies/day
- showing signs of dehydration (very thirsty, cold hands and feet, dry lips and tongue, sunken eyes, sunken fontanelle, sleepy or drowsy)
- unable to tolerate any oral intake because of severe vomiting

How do I treat it?

The main treatment is to give enough fluids to prevent your child becoming dehydrated. Babies and children below 3 years old are most at risk and may need to be checked by a doctor. Give small amounts of fluids frequently as they can usually tolerate this better than large volumes at a time. You should continue to give fluids even if they are vomiting. Many common medicines to reduce vomiting or diarrhoea are often not helpful and may instead be harmful in children. Antibiotic treatment is also unnecessary and unhelpful in most cases because the infection is usually caused by viruses which do not respond to this treatment.

What fluids should I use?

The best fluids to use are Oral Rehydration Solutions (ORS), e.g., Hydralyte, Gastrolyte, Repalyte etc., which are available from your local chemist. They contain glucose and different salts which tend to be lost from the body during vomiting or diarrhoea. Make them up EXACTLY as it says on the packet. Breast fed babies should continue to be breastfed but may need to be fed more frequently. ORS or water (boiled if the baby is less than 6 months old) may be offered to babies in addition to breast feeds. Bottle fed babies may need to have both ORS and their formula at normal strength.

What can I do if they refuse to take the oral rehydration solution?

Chilling the fluids or making them into iceblocks may help your child to take them. Some children may still refuse to drink. In this situation water or other fluids such as diluted juice or soft drinks may be given, although they are not as good as ORS because they don't have all the extra salts in the right amounts and have sugars which are not as well absorbed. DO NOT GIVE UNDILUTED juice, sodas, sports drinks or other soft drinks as they have too much sugar and may make the diarrhoea worse. Chicken broth is also not recommended as it has too much salt and no sugar.

How much fluid do they need?

This depends on the age and size of the child and also how dehydrated they are.

The minimum daily requirements in children are:

3-10kg (1-12months)	100ml/kg
10-20kg (1-5yrs)	1000ml + 50ml/kg for each kg over 10kg
>20kg	1500ml + 20ml/kg for each kg over 20kg

You may also need to give an extra 2ml/kg for every vomit and 10ml/kg for each diarrhoeal stool in addition to the maintenance amount of fluids required.

Give small volumes frequently, e.g. 5ml (1tsp) every 5 minutes, is better tolerated than 60ml all at once every hour.

What about food?

Doctors no longer recommend restricting food intake during gastroenteritis. Your child may not feel like eating initially but should be allowed to eat once they feel hungry.

Bottle fed babies on infant formula should be given their formula at normal strength and not diluted down. The only foods to avoid are those with high sugar content such as undiluted juice, cordials, soft drinks, jelly, jam, sweets, chocolate etc. as they may make the diarrhoea worse.

Lactose intolerance is uncommon in young Australian children but may occur temporarily after a bout of gastroenteritis. This may be suspected if their diarrhoea worsens and is watery, frothy and explosive after drinking milk or formula. If this occurs, then a lactose free or soy formula may be used for a few weeks until the gut recovers.

Digestive Health Foundation

This information leaflet has been designed by the Digestive Health Foundation as an aid for parents of children with gastroenteritis or for those who wish to know more about this topic. This is not meant to replace personal advice from your medical practitioner.

The Digestive Health Foundation (DHF) is an educational body committed to promoting better health for all Australians by promoting education and community health programs related to the digestive system.

The DHF is the educational arm of the Gastroenterological Society of Australia (GESA). GESA is the professional body representing the specialty of gastrointestinal and liver disease. Members of the Society are drawn from physicians, surgeons, scientists and other medical specialties with an interest in gastrointestinal (GI) disorders. GI disorders are the most common health related problems affecting the community.

Research and education into gastrointestinal disease are essential to contain the effects of these disorders on all Australians.

Further information on a wide variety of gastrointestinal conditions is available on our website - www.gesa.org.au

dhf

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