

# Acute Diarrhea (Gastroenteritis)

Diarrhea is a common problem in children, and one of the most frequent reasons for visits to the doctor's office. Infections with viruses or bacteria are the main causes of acute diarrhea, but other causes are possible. Regardless of the reason for the diarrhea, your child must be watched carefully to avoid dehydration, especially in infants.

## What is acute diarrhea?

Diarrhea means loose bowel movements, usually causing to move his or her bowels frequently. Vomiting may be present as well.

Acute diarrhea means the diarrhea lasts for only a limited time; this is also called *gastroenteritis*. There are many possible causes of gastroenteritis, including infections with bacteria, viruses, or parasites. Diarrhea may also be a symptom of other diseases, but this is less common.

Gastroenteritis is a leading cause of illness in children worldwide, especially in places where children are living in unsanitary conditions. Acute diarrhea usually clears up within a few days to a week.

Your child may need antibiotics or other treatments if the cause is infection with a bacteria or parasite. If the cause is a virus (commonly called "stomach flu"), antibiotics are not effective. You'll need to watch your child closely to make sure the diarrhea isn't causing him or her to become dehydrated and to give fluids to replace what is being lost.

## What does it look like?

- Acute diarrhea may start suddenly. Your child begins having frequent bowel movements; it may seem like he or she simply can't stop going to the bathroom.
  - Bowel movements are loose and watery.
- Blood may be present in the bowel movements. This may be more common if bacteria are the cause of acute diarrhea. *Call your doctor's office if your child has bloody stools.*
- Vomiting may be an early symptom but usually doesn't continue for more than a few days.
- Other symptoms may include abdominal cramps and fever.

## What causes acute diarrhea?

There are many possible causes of gastroenteritis. Some of the most common are:

- *Viruses.* Infections caused by viruses are the most common cause of acute diarrhea. These infections are sometimes called stomach flu, although they are not caused by the influenza virus. Diarrhea caused by viruses usually clears up within a few days, with no need for antibiotics.
- *Bacteria.* Diarrhea can be caused by infections with bacteria, such as *Salmonella*, *Shigella*, or certain types of *Escherichia coli*. These germs may be spread by means of contaminated foods or water or by your child's getting germs from an infected person into his or her mouth. Some of these infections are treated with antibiotics, but others are not.
- *Parasites.* Diarrhea may be caused by certain parasites; the most common is *Giardia lamblia*. These infections are more likely if your child has recently traveled or come from an area where these parasites are common. However, outbreaks can occur in other areas as well. Specific drugs are given to kill the parasite.
- *Many other causes are possible*, including allergies, food poisoning, and gastrointestinal or other diseases. If your child's diarrhea doesn't clear up as expected, your doctor may recommend tests to help pinpoint the cause.

## What are some possible complications of acute diarrhea?

*Dehydration* is the main complication of diarrhea in children. It occurs when your child doesn't drink enough liquid to replace the fluids his or her body is losing because of diarrhea. Your child may become dehydrated even if he or she doesn't feel thirsty. Dehydration can develop quickly, especially in infants.

Signs of *early dehydration* are:

- Urinating less often, in smaller amounts.
- Dryness or stickiness inside the mouth.
- Decreased appearance of tears when crying.

Signs of *more severe dehydration* are:

- No tears.
- Dry or sunken eyes.
- In babies, sunken "soft spot" on top of the head (fontanelle).
- Doughy-looking skin.
- Extreme sleepiness.

To avoid dehydration, give fluids, including special preparations such as Pedialyte.

Call our office if your child develops symptoms of dehydration.

## What puts your child at risk of acute diarrhea?

- Diarrhea is a very common symptom. Nearly all children develop at least mild diarrhea at one time or another.
- Certain factors increase your child's risk of acute diarrhea, including going to day-care facilities, living in unsanitary conditions, and travelling to areas where parasites are common.
- Children who have diseases that impair the ability of the immune system to fight off germs are at higher risk of getting infections that lead to acute diarrhea, including some viruses and parasites that would not cause diarrhea in healthier children.

## Can acute diarrhea be prevented?

Have your child wash his or her hands frequently and take other steps to avoid spreading the infection causing your child's diarrhea.

## How is acute diarrhea treated?

*Determining the cause.* The doctor will examine your child and ask questions to help determine what is causing his or her diarrhea. Your child's other symptoms, in addition to information on what he or she has eaten, can provide important clues. Your doctor may also have an idea of what diarrhea-causing germs are "circulating" in your community. A sample of your child's bowel movement may be examined or tested for clues to the possible cause.

*Treatment.* If infection with a certain type of bacteria is the cause, your child may receive antibiotic treatment. Antibiotics are given to help your child recover more quickly, reduce the chances of spreading the infection, and prevent complications. Make sure your child finishes his or her prescribed antibiotic; don't stop giving the medication because he or she seems better.

- If infection with a parasite is suspected, your child will undergo further tests. Special medications may be needed to kill the parasite.
- If infection with a virus is the cause, antibiotics will not be helpful—these medications kill only bacteria, not viruses. Most viral causes of diarrhea clear up within a few days.


*Preventing dehydration.* Regardless of what is causing your child's diarrhea, the most important treatment is fluids to replace what is being lost to prevent dehydration. This is especially true in infants, who can lose body fluids very rapidly.

- Special solutions, such as Pedialyte, are available to replace lost body fluids. These products provide not only water but also sugars and electrolytes (salts) that your child's body needs. These preparations help your child's body to absorb as much water as possible.

- For older children who won't drink Pedialyte, Gatorade and Crystal Light are good liquids to give. Don't give fruit juices because they can make diarrhea worse. Milk is allowed. Most children with mild diarrhea who can drink milk don't need special fluid solutions.

*Treating dehydration.* If your child is dehydrated, he or she may need large amounts of fluids. The fluids may be given in small amounts over short periods of time. If necessary, give as little as a teaspoon every minute or two. After a while, you can gradually give larger amounts of fluid replacement over longer intervals. Your child can eat other foods too, if he or she can tolerate them.

- Fluids to replace what has been lost is important even if your child is vomiting. Give as much fluid as possible, even if it's just a teaspoon or two, at frequent intervals. Vomiting usually decreases with time.


If vomiting is continued or severe, and your child is not "holding down" any fluids, he or she may need to go to the hospital. There intravenous (IV) fluids will be given, along with other needed treatments. 

- After your child is rehydrated (no longer dehydrated), resume feeding as soon as possible, including breast-feeding for infants. For older children, start with foods such as rice or bread, lean meats, yogurt, or vegetables.
- Usually, children shouldn't use over-the-counter antidiarrheal medicines, such as Imodium or Kaopectate. These products may decrease the number of bowel movements but not reduce the amount of diarrhea.
- The duration and severity of your child's diarrhea will depend mainly on the cause. Most cases of diarrhea should start to get better in a few days.

## When should I call your office?

Call our office if:

- Your child's diarrhea doesn't start getting better within 3 to 5 days.
- Your child has severe or continued vomiting that makes it impossible to replace missing fluids.
- You are having trouble advancing your child's diet, especially if he or she can't eat for more than 1 day.

Call our office immediately if: 

- Your child has symptoms of dehydration.
- He or she has little or no urination; in babies, no wet diaper for 6 to 8 hours.
- Dryness inside the mouth.
- Unusual sleepiness.
- Sunken eyes or soft spot (fontanelle).
- Diarrhea with visible blood.

