

Diarrhea, Vomiting, and Water Loss (Dehydration)



Diarrhea (loose poop) and vomiting, or “throwing up,” are why many parents call the doctor. Your child’s doctor may call this gastroenteritis (GAS-troh-en-tur-EYE-tis). These symptoms are often caused by a **virus***.

Your child may first have a fever and some vomiting. Diarrhea often starts later. The symptoms usually go away in a day or two. But they can last a week before getting better.

One danger with diarrhea and vomiting is that your child’s body can get dried out or dehydrated (dee-hye-DRAY-dud). This happens when the body loses too much water.

Call the Doctor If...

...your child has diarrhea, vomiting, and is younger than 6 months or your child has:

- A fever over 102°F or 39°C.
- Blood in the stool (poop) or vomit.
- Green vomit.
- Vomiting for more than 12 hours or diarrhea for more than 2 days.
- Belly pain.

Also Call the Doctor If...

...your child has any of these signs of being too dry:

- Pees very little (wets fewer than 6 diapers per day)
- Has no tears when crying
- Can’t or won’t drink anything or feels very thirsty
- Has a dry, sticky mouth, or dry lips
- Looks like he or she has lost weight
- Has sunken eyes or sunken soft spot on head (for babies)
- Acts very tired or strange

Most of the time you can treat this by getting your child to drink something and eat simple foods. (See the list below.)

But your child may need a special fluid that you can buy in a store. It’s called an **electrolyte drink***. If your child can’t drink this, then he or she may need to go to the hospital.

Call your child’s doctor if vomiting or diarrhea won’t go away. The doctor may want to check your child.

What Can You Give Your Child When He or She Has Diarrhea?

For children 1 year old or older, these simple foods and drinks are fine:

- Rice
- Wheat bread or pasta
- Boiled or baked potatoes
- Cereal, like oatmeal
- Boiled egg
- Lean meat like chicken
- Fruits and vegetables (cooked)
- Bananas and applesauce
- Yogurt or milk
- Breast milk or infant formula
- Special electrolyte drinks

For all ages, don’t give these foods or drinks:

- Fatty foods like French fries, chips, ice cream, cheese, or fried meats
- Sugary foods like candy, cookies, or cake
- Sugary drinks like juices or soda pop or very salty broths or soups when diarrhea is bad
- *Never* give boiled milk.

For children younger than 1 year check with your child’s doctor.

* Words to Know

electrolyte (uh-LEK-troh-lyt) **drink**—a special sugar and salt drink you can buy in a bottle. These drinks are very helpful for diarrhea. Pedialyte is one brand made for children.

virus (VYE-ris)—a kind of germ that causes infection. Antibiotics do not work against viruses. The body usually needs to get over the virus on its own.

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What to Do for Vomiting

- Give small sips of clear fluids every 10 to 15 minutes.
- If your child keeps vomiting but is NOT dry, wait 1 to 2 hours before trying again. Stop if your child starts to throw up again, and call the doctor.
- If your child is keeping down fluids and wants to eat, try giving small amounts of simple foods. See the chart on simple foods on the first page of this handout.

Remember, if you are worried or don't know what to do, call your child's doctor.

What to Do for Diarrhea

Most diarrhea lasts 3 to 6 days or even longer. Don't worry as long as your child acts well and is eating and drinking and peeing like usual.

Mild Illness

Most children should keep eating normal foods when they have mild diarrhea.

The doctor may suggest changing what your child eats for a few days. This might mean stopping cow's milk, but breastfeeding your baby is fine.

Moderate Illness

Children with moderate diarrhea can be cared for at home.

- They need special fluids, like electrolyte drinks. Talk with the doctor about how much and how long to give these and which to buy.
- Some children can't handle cow's milk when they have diarrhea. They may need to stop drinking it for a few days. Breastfeeding is fine for babies.
- As your child gets better, he or she can go back to normal foods.

Severe (Very Bad) Illness

See the "Call the Doctor If" list. Call the doctor right away if your child shows any of those warning signs. You may need to take your child to the emergency room for treatment.

Answers to Common Questions

Q. What should you do when your child is vomiting?

A. Try to give small sips of clear fluids every 10 to 15 minutes. If vomiting continues, call your child's doctor.

Q. Should you keep a child with diarrhea from drinking or eating?

A. A child with diarrhea can usually drink and eat most foods. If there is enough diarrhea to make your child very thirsty, he or she needs a special fluid called an electrolyte drink.

Soda pop, soups, and juices are OK for a child with mild diarrhea. But don't give these to a child with bad diarrhea. They have the wrong amounts of sugar and salt and can make your child sicker. Boiled skim milk is dangerous for all children. Sports drinks may be used for school-aged children.

As soon as the dryness (dehydration) clears up, let children eat simple foods. See the list of foods on the first page of this handout. They can have as much as they want.

Q. What about diarrhea medicines?

A. These do *not* help in most cases. They can sometimes be harmful. Never use them unless your child's doctor tells you to.

Remember These Dos and Dont's

- Do watch for signs of dehydration.
- Do call the doctor if your child has a high fever, has blood in his or her stool (poop), or starts acting different than normal.
- Do keep feeding your child if he or she is not throwing up.
- Do give your child special electrolyte drinks if your child is thirsty.
- Don't try to make your own electrolyte drinks.
- Don't give your child boiled milk.
- Don't use "anti-diarrhea" medicines unless told to by the doctor.

To learn more, visit the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Web site at www.aap.org.

Your child's doctor will tell you to do what's best for your child. This information should not take the place of talking with your child's doctor.

Note: Brand names are for your information only. The AAP does not recommend any specific brand of drugs or products.

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