

Gastroenteritis in Children

Gastroenteritis causes diarrhea and / or vomiting. It is due to an infection in the gut. The main risk is dehydration. The main treatment is to give the child lots to drink. Rehydration drinks are sometimes advised. See a doctor if you suspect that a child is dehydrating, or if they have other worrying symptoms, which are listed below.

What is gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis is an infection of the guts (intestines). Many bacteria, viruses, and other microbes (bugs) can cause gastroenteritis. It can range from a mild stomach upset for a day or two with some mild diarrhea, to severe vomiting and diarrhea for several days or longer.

What are the symptoms of gastroenteritis?

- Diarrhea and / or vomiting are the main symptoms.
- Crampy pains in the abdomen (tummy) are common. Pains may ease for a while each time some diarrhea is passed.
- High temperatures (fever) and headaches are common.

If vomiting occurs, it typically lasts a day or so. Diarrhea may last for several days or more after the vomiting stops. Loose stools (motions or faces) can persist for a week or so before a normal pattern returns.

What causes gastroenteritis?

- A virus is a common cause in the UK. Sometimes it is just 'one of those bugs going about'. Viruses are easily spread from one person to another by close contact, or when an infected person prepares food for others.
- Sometimes it is caused from infected food (food poisoning). Salmonella is a well-known bacterium that may infect food, but many other types of bacteria can cause food poisoning.
- Water contaminated by bacteria or other microbes is a common cause in some countries with poor sanitation.

Can gastroenteritis be prevented?

Good hygiene helps to prevent gastroenteritis. Always wash your hands and teach children to wash theirs:

- After going to the toilet (and after changing dirty nappies).
- Before touching food.
- After gardening.
- After playing with pets (healthy animals can carry certain harmful bacteria).
- Between handling raw meat and food ready to be eaten. (There may be some bacteria on raw meat.)

If a child has gastroenteritis, the following are also recommended until symptoms go.

- Regularly clean the toilets they use.
- Wipe the flush handle and toilet seat with disinfectant (such as household bleach) after each time they use the toilet.
- Make sure they wash their hands after going to the toilet. Don't share towels and flannels.
- Do not let them help to prepare food for others.

What is the treatment for gastroenteritis in children?

Symptoms often settle within a week or so as the immune system usually clears the infection. The following are commonly advised until symptoms ease.

- **Give the child lots to drink.** The aim is to avoid dehydration (low body fluid), which is the main possible complication. Even if the child vomits or feels sick, you should still give frequent sips, as some fluid will still be absorbed. Ideally, give water as the main drink, but also give some fruit juice as this contains some sugar. However, any drink is better than none. If the child will only drink their favorite drink then that is fine. (Ice cubes and Popsicles are useful extra sources of fluid.)
- **A doctor or nurse may advise rehydration drinks** if they are concerned that the child is at risk of dehydration. You can give these instead of, or in addition to, normal drinks. Rehydration drinks can be bought from pharmacies. Rehydration drinks provide a perfect balance of water, salt, and sugar. They are better than just drinking water alone. The small amount of sugar and salt helps the water to be absorbed better from the gut into the body. They do not stop or reduce diarrhea, but are the best drinks to prevent or treat dehydration. (Do not use home made salt drinks, as the quantity of salt has to be exact.)
- **The child should eat as normally as possible.** Do not 'starve' a child with gastroenteritis. This used to be advised but is now known to be wrong. However, if he or she does not want to eat, then that is fine. Drinks are the most important and food can wait until their appetite returns. Offer some food every now and then. Soups and food high in carbohydrate such as bread, crackers, and pasta are best to start with.
- **Breast fed babies** should continue to breast feed if they will take it. This is in addition to extra rehydration drinks if they are advised.
- **Bottle fed babies** should be fed with their normal full strength feeds if they will take it.

Again, this is in addition to extra rehydration drinks if they are advised.

- **You should never give medicines to stop diarrhea** to children. They sound attractive remedies, but are unsafe to give to children due to possible complications.
- **Give Tylenol** to ease fever, headache, or stomach pains.

However, some gut infections do not clear without treatment. If symptoms are severe, or persist, a doctor may ask for a stool sample. This is sent to the lab to look for infecting microbes (bacteria, parasites, etc). Sometimes an antibiotic or other treatments are needed.

Are there any complications from gastroenteritis?

Complications are uncommon. See a doctor if any of the following develop, or if any other symptoms occur that you are concerned about.

- Dehydration. Symptoms include: passing little urine, a dry mouth and tongue, drowsiness.
- Blood in the diarrhea.
- Vomiting for more than 1 day, or diarrhea, which does not start to settle after 3-4 days.
- Pains which are getting worse
- Drowsiness or confusion.
- Infections caught abroad.

Admission to hospital is sometimes needed if symptoms are severe, or if complications develop.