

Diarrhea

(Viral Gastroenteritis)

DEFINITION

Diarrhea is the sudden increase in the number of loose stools. When there are a few loose and mushy stools, the diarrhea is mild. Moderate diarrhea gives many watery stools. Diarrhea becomes severe when the number of stools increases. The main complication of diarrhea is dehydration from the loss of body fluids.

CAUSES

Diarrhea is usually caused by a viral infection of the intestines. Occasionally bacteria or parasites cause it. Diarrhea can be due to excessive fruit juice or to a food allergy. If only one or two loose stools are passed, the cause was probably something unusual your child ate.

EXPECTED COURSE

Diarrhea usually lasts from several days to a week, regardless of the treatment. The main goal of therapy is to prevent dehydration by giving enough oral fluids to keep up with the fluids lost in the diarrhea. Don't expect a quick return to solid stools. Since one loose stool can mean nothing, don't start dietary changes until there have been a least two.

HOME CARE FOR DIARRHEA

Special Diet for Diarrhea

Mild Diarrhea and Child of Any Age: Continue a regular diet with a few simple changes.

- Continue full-strength formula or milk. Encourage an increased intake of these fluids and extra water.
- Reduce the intake of fruit juices. If given, make them half strength with water.
- Avoid raw fruits and vegetables, beans, spicy foods, and any foods that cause loose stools.



Bottle-Fed Infants and Frequent, Watery Diarrhea:

- Pedialyte* for 6 to 24 hours
- Pedialyte helps prevent dehydration for those children with severe diarrhea
- Give as much Pedialyte as your baby wants. Never restrict fluids when your child has diarrhea.
- Between 6 and 24 hours, switch back to formula when your baby becomes hungry, the diarrhea becomes less watery, and the child is making lots of urine.
- If the diarrhea continues to be severe, begin with a soy formula. Plan to keep your baby on the soy formula until the diarrhea is gone for 3 days.
- If your baby's bowel movements are very watery, mix the formula with 1 or 2 ounces of extra water per bottle for 24 hours, then return to full-strength formula.
- If your baby is over 4 months old, has had diarrhea for over 24 hours, and wants to eat solid food, give these foods until diarrhea is gone: any cereal, mashed potatoes, applesauce, strained bananas, strained carrots, and other high-fiber foods.

Breast-Fed Infants and Frequent, Watery Diarrhea

- Diarrhea for a breast-fed infant is hard to detect but can be diagnosed if your baby's stools quickly increase in number.
- Additional clues are if your baby feeds poorly, acts sick, or develops a fever.
- Continue breast-feeding, but more often. Breast-feeding should never be stopped because of diarrhea.
- If urine decreases in numbers, offer pedialyte between breast-feedings for 6 to 24 hours.

Older Children (over 1 year old) and Frequent, Watery Diarrhea:

- The choice of solids is the key factor—starchy foods are absorbed best. Give cereals (rice), oatmeal, bread, noodles, mashed potatoes, carrots, applesauce, strained bananas, etc. Pretzels or salty crackers can help meet your child's sodium needs.
- For fluids, use water (if solids are being consumed), clear liquids, Kool-Aid. If no solids are being consumed, offer pedialyte.
- Avoid milk for 2 to 3 days (lactose is not as easily absorbed as complex carbohydrates). Yogurt with active cultures is fine.

Other Diarrhea Treatments:

- Diarrhea is very contagious. Hand washing after diaper changing or using the toilet is crucial for keeping everyone in the family from getting diarrhea.
- The skin near your baby's anus can become "burned" from the diarrhea stools. Wash it off after each bowel movement, if possible, let it air dry (or blow dry) and then protect it with a thick layer of petroleum jelly or other ointment.
- Call the office if fever lasts more than 3 days and/or if mild diarrhea lasts more than 2 weeks.

Call the office immediately if signs of dehydration occur:

- No urine in more than 8 hours
- Very dry mouth or coated tongue
- No tears
- Irritability, confusion, sluggish

IF YOUR CHILD HAS VOMITED MORE THAN ONCE, TREATMENT OF THE VOMITING HAS PRIORITY OVER THE TREATMENT OF DIARRHEA UNTIL YOUR CHILD HAS GONE 8 HOURS WITHOUT VOMITING.

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