

Spitting Up



(Gastroesophageal Reflux - GER)

Lots of babies, actually probably all babies, spit up some. The type of spitting to which I refer here is more than a "wet burp" that is infrequent and not a chronic problem.

In kids that are spitters, their lower esophageal sphincter "valve" doesn't work well to keep food down once it has been swallowed. This "valve" is not really a valve, and it is supposed to open up long enough to allow the baby to burp air that gets trapped in the stomach-from eating/swallowing. Some kids have slow-emptying stomachs in addition. They will spit up more than an hour after the last feeding.

There are three reasons to get worried about "spitting" or gastro-esophageal reflux:

- When the baby isn't gaining weight at a normal rate with no other reason.
- If the baby has frequent bronchitis or pneumonia - from the "spit-up" going down into the lungs down the "wrong pipe".
- When fussing and arching of the back become a problem.

Otherwise, babies with gastroesophageal reflux (GER) present a challenge to treat because the problem will resolve on its own, doesn't cause any long-term abnormalities, and doesn't even require treatment BUT THEY ARE A MESS! They spit up on all their clothes and yours, too. They always smell like "spit up." We used to call it "*eau de vomit*" at my house. So there are some reasons you may want to treat this benign problem. The challenges are to make sure treatment doesn't cause other problems, and working with the realization that a liquid diet, which is certainly the worst thing for someone with GER, is a necessity for at least a few months, and then only a few solids at a time are given.

Sometimes changing formula will help. Milk sensitivity or allergy will aggravate or cause the problem. In babies that are breastfed, having mom change her diet will sometimes help (no milk, no caffeine etc.). But most people who are getting this handout have tried those "easy" fixes.

Things that will help in most babies, whether they are breastfed or bottle-fed.

- Smaller, more frequent feedings. Don't fill up the stomach so much.
- Position upright after feeding - don't lay the baby down right after eating, 'so gravity will be on your side.
- Burp well and often - instead of a big one after a full feeding - you're tempting fate

Something that may help in bottle babies (sorry, breast moms, but at least the spit-up doesn't smell as bad in your baby):

- Thicken formula with cereal. To a 4-ounce bottle add from 1-4 tsp. of rice or oatmeal cereal (dry). You may have to enlarge the nipple size to accommodate the thicker liquid. WARNING: If your baby seems fussier after you try this -"Heinz ketchup" treatment, stop it and call. The baby may still be refluxing but having heartburn instead of spitting.

BAD NEWS Reflux peaks at 4 months.

GOOD NEWS GER goes away by 8-10 months of age. The reasons: gravity (baby spends more time upright than lying down), and the Heinz ketchup theory (more solid than liquid diet).

The stomach has a sphincter valve at the end where it dumps into the small intestine, called the pyloric sphincter. Overgrowth of a valve causes pyloric stenosis, which is a potentially serious problem which requires surgery to fix it. Typically it occurs in boys and is characterized by progressively worse vomiting over the first 2-6 weeks of life. The vomiting is described as projectile, but almost all vomiting or even a good "spit" can "project". The most important thing is that these babies don't look well, healthy and thriving. When this has been going on for more than a few days, the kid is sick – not gaining weight, lethargic and/or fussy beyond normal.

All that to say, this is not what we are talking about in this handout.