

Gastroenteritis in Children

Gastroenteritis causes diarrhoea 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. Special 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 (germs) can cause gastroenteritis. It can range from a mild stomach upset for a day or two with some mild diarrhoea, to severe vomiting and diarrhoea for several days or longer.

What are the symptoms of gastroenteritis?

- The main symptom is diarrhoea, often with vomiting as well.
- Crampy pains in the abdomen (tummy) are common. Pains may ease for a while each time some diarrhoea is passed.
- High temperatures (fever) and headaches are common.

If vomiting occurs, it typically lasts a day or so. Diarrhoea often lasts for several days or more and often continues after the vomiting stops. Loose stools (motions or faeces) can persist for a week or so before a normal pattern returns. Sometimes the symptoms last longer.

What causes gastroenteritis?

- A virus is a common cause in the UK. Sometimes it is just 'one of those germs 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). There are many types of bacteria that can cause food poisoning. For example, campylobacter and salmonella.
- Water contaminated by bacteria or other germs is a common cause, particularly in 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 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. Also, 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.
- They should stay off school, nursery, etc until symptoms have gone.

What is the treatment for gastroenteritis in children?

Symptoms often settle after a few days 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). 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 favourite drink then that is fine. Ice lollies are a useful extra source of fluid.
- **Rehydration drinks** may be advised by a doctor or nurse 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 are made from sachets that you can buy from pharmacies. You add the contents of the sachet to water. 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 diarrhoea, 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, pasta, rice and potatoes 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 which may be 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 which may be advised.
- **You should not give medicines to stop diarrhoea** to young children. They sound attractive remedies, but are unsafe to give to children due to possible complications.
- **Give paracetamol or ibuprofen** to ease a high temperature or headache.

If symptoms are severe, or persist, a doctor may ask for a sample of the diarrhoea. This is sent to the lab to look for infecting germs (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 diarrhoea.
- Vomiting for more than one day, or diarrhoea that does not start to settle after 3-4 days.
- Pains that are getting worse.
- Drowsiness or confusion.
- Infections caught abroad.

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