

What is gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis is the name for an infection in the bowel causing diarrhoea (loose, watery bowel motions). It affects all age groups but is more common and severe in young children. For the first 24 to 48 hours your child may have vomiting and fever. Diarrhoea usually develops during this time and lasts 4 to 10 days. Your child may also have stomach pains.

What causes gastroenteritis?

In most cases gastroenteritis is caused by viruses which come in epidemics, particularly in winter. Rotavirus is a common cause of childhood gastroenteritis in those children who have not been immunised against it. Occasionally the illness is due to bacteria, in which case the diarrhoea may last longer, have blood and mucous in it, and cause a fever and stomach pains.

How can I stop the spread of gastroenteritis?

- > Thorough hand washing- especially after going to the toilet, after changing nappies and before food preparation.
- > Clothes soiled with diarrhoea should be washed and rinsed separately from the rest of the family laundry.
- > Avoid sharing food and drinks.

- > Keep your child away from friends and other children until the vomiting and diarrhoea has settled.
- > Children with diarrhoea must stay away from their child care centre, kindergarten or school until the diarrhoea has settled. It is important to let your child's child care centre, kindergarten or school know of your child's illness.

What do I have to worry about?

The main concern is the loss of fluid due to vomiting and diarrhoea, which can lead to dehydration. The younger the child the easier it is for them to become dehydrated. The signs of dehydration are listed under 'see a doctor if'.

How is gastroenteritis treated?

Increasing fluid intake is the main form of treatment for gastroenteritis. This helps to replace the fluid losses from vomiting and diarrhoea. Small amounts of fluid given frequently may be better tolerated than large amounts given less often.

Oral electrolyte solutions are the best fluids to give during gastroenteritis, eg Gastrolyte™ or Hydralyte™. Oral electrolyte solutions are specifically designed drinks which help replace body fluids and salts that are lost during vomiting and diarrhoea. These solutions can be purchased from most local pharmacies without a prescription.

It is important to read the mixing and dosage instructions on the pack. This therapy will help

to rehydrate the child but it will not stop the vomiting and diarrhoea.

What can my child eat and drink when he/she has gastroenteritis?

Unless otherwise advised by your child's doctor, it is important to return your child to his/her normal food and fluid intake as soon as possible. Generally, children should be offered food if they are hungry even if diarrhoea continues.

Cow's milk and milk formula can be given at normal strength.

Caution

Do not give drinks that have a high sugar content such as soft drinks, fruit juice, Lucozade®, Ribena™ and sports drinks to children with gastroenteritis as they can make the diarrhoea worse.

Antibiotics, anti-diarrhoeal or anti-vomiting medicines are rarely, if ever, needed, and may be dangerous.

What do I do if my baby is breastfed?

Continue to fully breastfeed. You may need to increase the frequency of the feeds. The baby can also be given extra fluids between breastfeeds such as oral electrolyte solutions. See a doctor if this is not tolerated.

Gastroenteritis

See a doctor if:

- > Vomiting is frequent and your child is unable to keep fluids down
- > Your child has a lot of diarrhoea (8-10 watery motions or 2-3 very large motions per day)
- > Your child's diarrhoea contains blood
- > Your child shows signs of dehydration e.g. dry mouth and tongue; sunken eyes; cold hands and feet; lack of energy and unusually sleepy
- > Your child is less than six months old
- > Your child develops severe stomach pain
- > Your child has a pre-existing medical condition
- > You are at all worried

Suitable fluids for children who are not dehydrated from gastroenteritis	
Solution	Dilution
Oral electrolyte solution (e.g. Gastrolyte™ from pharmacies)	Prepare as per instructions on the packet
Unsweetened fruit juice (e.g. clear apple juice, clear pineapple juice or orange juice)	20 ml juice to every 80 ml water
Glucose (e.g. Glucodin) from pharmacies	2 level teaspoons in 240 ml water.
Cordials (NOT low calorie)	10 ml cordial to every 160 ml water
Fizzy soft drinks (NOT low calorie (e.g. lemonade)	20 ml soft drink to every 80 ml water (use warm water as it removes the bubbles)

For more information

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www.wch.sa.gov.au

The Women's and Children's Hospital is a smoke-free site

Non-English speaking: for information in languages other than English, call the interpreting and Translating Centre and ask them to call The Department of Health. This service is available at no cost to you, contact (08) 8226 1990.

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