

Vomiting and diarrhoea

Vomiting and diarrhoea (loose, watery bowel motions) are often caused by a gastrointestinal (gut) infection. They can cause our bodies to lose a lot of fluid and become dehydrated, so it is important to drink or sip fluids regularly while you are ill. Special oral rehydration solutions are the best fluids to drink. Ask a pharmacist for advice.

Main causes

Vomiting and diarrhoea are often caused by a gastrointestinal infection (often called gastroenteritis or 'gastro'). They can also be caused by a range of other medical conditions.

Causes of vomiting and/or diarrhoea include:

- viral gut infection (e.g. norovirus, rotavirus)
- bacterial gut infection (e.g. salmonella, campylobacter) – can be caused by infected food or water (symptoms of 'food poisoning' usually start within 24 hours of eating infected food)
- parasite gut infection (e.g. giardia)
- non-gastrointestinal infections (e.g. ear infection, urinary tract infection)
- some medical conditions (e.g. appendicitis, irritable bowel syndrome, inflammatory bowel disease)

- some medicines (e.g. antibiotics, orlistat, cancer chemotherapy)
- food intolerance (e.g. lactose)
- alcohol
- pregnancy
- anxiety.

Other symptoms that often occur with vomiting and diarrhoea include nausea, poor appetite, stomach pain, fever and tiredness.

Risks

- Dehydration can develop rapidly, especially in the very young and the elderly. Severe dehydration can be fatal.
- Diarrhoea can cause temporary bowel damage, which may interfere with the digestion of lactose in dairy products. Avoid dairy products if they make diarrhoea worse.
- Many infections that cause vomiting and diarrhoea can spread easily from

person to person. Practice good personal hygiene when sick or caring for another sick person, and stay away from work or school whilst sick.

Treatment of vomiting and diarrhoea

Ask a doctor or pharmacist about the best treatment for you.

Rehydration

The most important treatment for vomiting and diarrhoea is to replace the fluid that is being lost. Oral rehydration solutions, which contain the correct balance of water, body salts and glucose, are the best fluids to use.

- Begin replacing fluid as soon as vomiting or diarrhoea starts.
- Use an oral rehydration solution. Oral rehydration products (e.g. *Hydralyte*, *Gastrolyte*, *Gluko-lyte*, *O.R.S.*, *Repalyte*, *Restore*) are available from pharmacies as solutions, ice blocks and tablets/powder for mixing in water.
- Carefully follow the product directions for mixing, storage and use. The balance of water, glucose and body salts in rehydration solutions is important. Use a ready-to-use product if you are not confident about making the solution yourself.
- Sip or suck small amounts of oral rehydration solution often, and after vomiting or a runny bowel motion.
- Drink enough fluid to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine 'light-coloured'. To replace lost fluid, most people need to drink more than usual.

- Do not use 'diet' drinks, 'sports' drinks or 'energy' drinks.

Medicines

Non-prescription medicines available from a pharmacist include:

- medicines to control diarrhoea (e.g. loperamide) – for adults only
- probiotics (e.g. *Lactobacillus*) – may help to relieve diarrhoea caused by viral 'gastro' infection.

Prescription medicines to relieve nausea and vomiting are also available.

Children below 12 should only be given rehydration solutions to relieve diarrhoea, unless told otherwise by a doctor.

Self care

Babies

- As breastfeeding protects against infection, continue breastfeeding and offer the breast more often (at least every 2 hours). Offer oral rehydration solution or boiled and cooled water between feeds.
- If baby is bottle-fed, give oral rehydration solution in place of formula at first. Restart normal strength formula or milk when vomiting has eased, and also offer small amounts of oral rehydration solution often.
- Restart usual strength formula or simple solid foods as soon as vomiting stops; if this does not happen within 24 hours, get medical advice.
- It may be necessary to try a lactose-free formula or milk. Ask a pharmacist.

- Always clean babies' bottles, teats and dummies, and items used to measure, mix or store liquids.
- It is best to prepare fresh formula for each feed and use immediately.
- Always throw away leftover formula or milk.
- Use an alcohol-based disinfectant to clean surfaces and equipment used to prepare and serve food surfaces and equipment to prepare and serve food.
- Wash hands and equipment immediately after handling raw meats.
- Promptly refrigerate food that needs to be kept cold (e.g. meat, milk, cheese).
- Cook food right through, and keep it hot (above 60°C) or refrigerate it without delay.
- Do not drink or swim in contaminated water.
- Maintain immunisation according to the National Immunisation Program Schedule.

Children and adults

- Use oral rehydration solution to replace lost fluids.
- If necessary, stop solid foods for a short time. Do not hold back solid food from a child for longer than 24 hours.
- After vomiting stops, keep sipping fluids and eat if hungry. Gradually re-introduce normal diet, avoiding sweet, fatty, spicy and acidic foods (e.g. onions, citrus, tomatoes) and spicy foods.
- Avoid milk or milk-based products, alcohol, caffeine and drinks containing a lot of sugar – they can make diarrhoea worse.
- Stay at home when ill.

Preventing 'gastro' infection

Gut infections can be caused by eating infected food, or drinking or using infected water or other liquids. To help protect against infection:

- Wash hands well with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds after going to the toilet, changing nappies, gardening or handling animals, and before touching food. If you can't wash your hands, use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser.

Signs of dehydration

Dehydration means there is not enough water in the body. Signs of dehydration include:

- thirst
- dark urine
- passing little or no urine
- dry mouth, tongue and lips
- fewer or no tears when crying
- skin stays up when pinched
- muscle cramps
- feeling tired, lightheaded, irritable
- headache
- changed breathing – fast or deep
- an irritable, sleepy or 'floppy' child
- the 'soft spot' on the top of a baby's head is more sunken than usual
- cold hands and feet
- eyes appear sunken.

Important

Get medical advice if the patient:

- is a baby less than 6 months old or less than 8 kg, or
- is elderly
- is less than 3 years old and has been vomiting for 12 hours
- is aged 3 to 6 years and has been vomiting for 24 hours
- is over 6 years old and has been vomiting for 48 hours
- is pregnant
- has signs of severe dehydration (e.g dizzy and lightheaded, confused, dark urine, very dry mouth)
- has less than four wet nappies a day
- cannot keep any fluids down
- is not drinking
- has had diarrhoea for more than a few days
- vomits blood, or brown or green bile
- has bloody or black stool/s (bowel motions)
- has severe pain in the abdomen (belly) or rectum
- has a high fever (over 38.5°C)
- is losing weight unintentionally

- has a weakened immune system (e.g HIV positive)
- has an underlying medical condition (e.g. diabetes, epilepsy)
- Has worsening symptoms.

For more information

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthdirect.gov.au

Medicines Line

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets

Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

Related Fact Cards

- » Anxiety
- » Childhood immunisation
- » Irritable bowel syndrome
- » Travel health

Your Self Care Pharmacy:

The Pharmaceutical Society of Australia is committed to providing current and reliable health information.

This card was current at the time of publication.

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