

Caring for the Child with Gastroenteritis (Vomiting/Diarrhea)

Adapted by Cynthia B. Triggs, MD
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Bergen West Pediatric Center

541 Cedar Hill Avenue

Wyckoff, NJ 07481

(201) 652-0300

Acute gastroenteritis is common in infants and children and is usually caused by a stomach virus. Symptoms include a fever, stomachache, vomiting and diarrhea. Although the fever and vomiting typically lasts only two to three days, the diarrhea can last for up to one week (or longer) before it finally resolves.

There is medicine to treat gastroenteritis, but there are many things that can be done to help your child through this illness.

The main problem from repetitive diarrhea and vomiting is that it can lead to **dehydration**. An early sign of dehydration is that your child will urinate less frequently (most children urinate every six to eight hours). Other signs include a dry mouth, crying without tears, sunken eyes, weight loss and decreased activity or increased irritability. If your child has persistent diarrhea and vomiting, but is still urinating regularly and has a moist mouth then there is a little danger that he is getting dehydrated.

Fluids for Gastroenteritis:

The best fluids for children with diarrhea and vomiting are oral **rehydration solutions**, such as Pedialyte, Infalyte or Kaoelectrolyte (also available as popsicles). These fluids have the right amount of water, sugar and salt that your child needs. You can buy them without a prescription at the supermarket or pharmacy.

Other choices, such as soft drinks, juices, Gatorade or Kool-Aid have too much sugar and can make the diarrhea or stomachache worse.

Treatment for Diarrhea:

If your child has diarrhea and is not vomiting or has only vomited a few times, then you can continue his usual diet (including breastfeeding or formula). Although your child will not be able to digest everything that he eats as well as he normally would, by eating a regular diet your child will continue to get the nutrition he needs to get well.

If your child is eating solid foods, continue with the regular diet. Good foods to give include cooked cereal, bananas, cooked meat, noodles, crackers, rice, potatoes, and yogurt. Avoid foods with a lot of sugar (such as Jell-O, ice cream, and sweetened cereals) and fried, fatty foods.

In most cases, you may continue to give milk and dairy products. However, if your child has had severe, prolonged diarrhea, (usually more than 5 days), then he may develop a temporary lactase deficiency and may not be able to tolerate dairy (lactose) products. You can try a soy formula or soy milk (or lactose-free milk, for children over one year) for a few weeks if your child's diarrhea becomes worse after drinking dairy products.

Treatment for Vomiting:

If your child has persistent vomiting and isn't keeping anything down, check him for signs of dehydration. If he is not dehydrated, then you can give him a break from drinking for an hour or so and then slowly begin to give him fluids again as described below. The most common error is giving a thirsty child too much to drink too soon, which causes them to continue vomiting.

We recommend giving **very small** amounts (1-3 teaspoons) of an oral rehydration solution every five or 10 minutes. Even though their stomach is very upset, most children with persistent vomiting are able to keep this down and over an hour or two they end up drinking enough fluid to keep them from getting dehydrated.

Once your child is keeping a few teaspoons of fluid down at a time without vomiting for a few hours, you can increase him to 2-3 tablespoons every five to ten minutes and after keeping this down for a few hours he can then drink an ounce or two at a time.

You should continue to give the oral rehydration solutions in small amounts until the vomiting improves and then restart his usual diet with extra fluid every time that he has diarrhea or vomiting.

Important Reminders:

Be Patient: This is a common illness that can last a week before resolving on its own.

Avoid giving just Pedialyte for more than 12-24 hours. Re-starting your child's regular diet as soon as possible will speed his recovery.

Avoid medications: Medicines for diarrhea and vomiting have not been shown to improve symptoms in children and can make them worse.

Take steps to prevent the spread of infection. Hand washing is the most important means of preventing diarrhea from spreading. Wash your hands and exposed arms with soap and warm water after caring for your child, especially after diaper changes. Teach your child to wash her hands before eating and, especially, after using the toilet. Children in daycare should remain home until the diarrhea has fully resolved.

Call our office if your child is becoming dehydrated (decreased urination, dry mouth, not having tears when crying, sunken eyes, and decreased activity or increased irritability), if your child is vomiting blood, if the diarrhea is not improved in one week or if there is blood or pus in the diarrhea. Also call if your child is vomiting and has a high fever, severe headache or stomachache.