

What next?

Your child will become brighter and may want some food. This is a good sign. You should feed bland, non-fatty foods at first, for example dry toast, a rusk or rice cake and again little and often.

Breast fed babies should continue to have breast milk. They may need extra Dioralyte by bottle.

Keep your child on Dioralyte or other clear fluids with a bland diet until there is no more diarrhoea. Gradually introduce a normal diet.

How long will the gastroenteritis last?

The diarrhoea usually lasts for two to five days. Sometimes it lasts up to 10 days. In many children, some loose stools may continue for several weeks.

If your child is alert, active and happy, everything is likely to settle with no further treatment.

Do antibiotics or anti-diarrhoea medicines help?

Antibiotics may make matters worse. They do not help where a virus causes the gastroenteritis. Anti-diarrhoea medicines may stop the diarrhoea temporarily, but they keep the virus inside the body instead of getting rid of it.

When can your child return to school or crèche?

Your child can return when there is no diarrhoea, they are eating normally and in accordance with your school or crèche rules.

Further information

Please call the children's nurse
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Gastroenteritis

A parent's guide



What is gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis is an infection of the bowel. Usually, it is a mild illness in young children but can be very serious in babies under six months old if not treated. It is quite a common illness.

What causes gastroenteritis?

It is usually caused by a virus, in the majority of cases "rotavirus". It can be caused by food poisoning.

How does a child catch it?

It is very easy to catch gastroenteritis and pass it from one person to the next. It is passed by the hand to the mouth after touching the child's bottom or a dirty nappy, or it can be passed by droplets of saliva like ordinary coughs and colds. You then develop diarrhoea.

Breast fed babies rarely get gastroenteritis because the breast milk contains antibodies.

Hygiene is very important. Wash your hands after every nappy change and wash your child's hands after they go to the toilet and before meals to prevent spreading the infection and passing it on to others.

What are the symptoms to look out for in a child?

Your child may show signs of some or all of the following:

- diarrhoea always occurs. This may start as a slightly runny nappy two-three times a day and go on to become watery green stools every hour or so
- going off their food
- vomiting is common, and can start before the diarrhoea
- fever, and
- grizzly.

How serious is it?

It can be very serious if your child becomes dehydrated when the fluid in the body gets very low from all the vomiting and diarrhoea.

Signs to look out for:

- may become distressed
- thirsty
- passes less urine
- becoming listless and floppy, and
- the hands and feet may feel cold and look mottled.

Contact your GP immediately if your child:

- vomits without diarrhoea for more than 24 hours
- vomits green fluid and/or
- has diarrhoea with blood in it.

How to prevent dehydration

If the illness is mild (less than five stools and three vomits a day) encourage your child to drink more, usually just little and often is best. Continue breast feeding, adding extra bottles of water or dilute juice.

If your child's condition becomes more severe, especially if there is more vomiting you should continue to breastfeed (if you are doing this). If not breastfeeding, stop your baby's milk for 24-48 hours and give dioralyte. Dioralyte is a special fluid, containing certain sugars and body salts that is taken quickly into the body and may stop vomiting. It can be bought at the chemist and should be given for 24-48 hours.

Give your child fluids little and often and continue giving fluids at night if your child is awake.

Do not give full strength juices, fizzy drinks, flat cola or lemonade as these can make dehydration worse.

Can the dehydration be reversed?

You should be able to reverse dehydration within 12-24 hours.