



# Vomiting & Diarrhoea

**Vomiting and diarrhoea are usually caused by a gastrointestinal (gut) infection. The body can lose a lot of fluid and dehydrate through vomiting and diarrhoea, so it is important to drink or sip fluids regularly while ill. Specially balanced salt and sugar solutions are the best fluid replacement.**

## Main causes

Vomiting and diarrhoea can be symptoms of a range of medical conditions. Gastrointestinal infections that cause vomiting and diarrhoea are commonly called gastroenteritis or 'gastro'. Gastro symptoms also include abdominal cramps, fever, fatigue and poor appetite.

Causes of vomiting and diarrhoea include:

- Viral gastroenteritis – viruses (e.g., rotavirus) are a common cause of gastro. Vomiting may settle quickly, while diarrhoea may continue a little longer
- Bacterial gastroenteritis (e.g., salmonella infection) – symptoms usually start 12-48 hours after eating infected food
- Other gastroenteritis (e.g., giardia infection)
- 'Non-gastro' infections (e.g., blood poisoning,)
- Other medical conditions (e.g., diarrhoea may be a symptom of irritable bowel syndrome or inflammatory bowel disease)
- Some medicines (e.g., antibiotics)
- Food intolerance.
- Alcohol
- Anxiety.

## Risks

- Dehydration can develop rapidly, especially in the very young and the elderly. A dehydrated person needs fluid replacement urgently.
- Diarrhoea can cause temporary bowel damage, which impairs the digestion of lactose in dairy products. Dairy products should be avoided if they make diarrhoea worse.

## Important

Consult a doctor if:

- Vomiting and unable to keep fluids down for more than 24 hours (or three hours for a baby)
- Brown or green bile or blood in vomit
- Diarrhoea lasts longer than a few days (or 24-48 hours in a young child)
- Bowel motions are bloody or black
- Signs of dehydration develop
- Severe stomach/abdominal pain
- A high fever (over 38°C)
- Losing weight
- A persistent change in bowel habit
- Patient is a baby that is less than six months old or difficult to wake.

## Signs of dehydration

Signs of dehydration include:

- Dark urine
- Little or no urine passed for 8 hours or more (or 2-3 hours in young children)
- Dry mouth, tongue and lips and no tears
- Skin stays up when pinched
- Sunken eyes, cheeks or abdomen or shadows under eyes
- Changed breathing – either quick, or slow and deep
- Cold, clammy skin
- An irritable, sleepy or 'floppy' child
- The 'soft spot' in the top of baby's head more sunken than usual.

## Rehydration

Replacement of water and salts is the most important treatment for vomiting and diarrhoea.

- Begin fluid replacement as soon as vomiting or diarrhoea starts.
- Use specially designed 'oral fluid replacement' or 'oral rehydration' solutions (e.g., Hydralyte, Gastrolyte, Pedialyte, Repalyte) to replace body salts, glucose and water. They are available from pharmacies as solutions, ice blocks and tablets/powder for mixing in water.
- The balance of water, glucose and body salts in rehydration solutions is important. Use a ready made product if not confident about making the solution yourself.
- Small amounts of rehydration solution should be sipped or sucked frequently and after vomiting or a runny bowel motion.
- Adults need 2-3 litres of fluid in 24 hours to stay hydrated. The amount of fluid a child needs depends on age.
- Juice, cordial or soft drinks (e.g., lemonade) should only be used as fluid replacement if symptoms are mild. The juice, cordial or soft drink should be diluted with water so that it 'only just' tastes sweet.

## Medicines

- Medicines to control diarrhoea are available from a pharmacist for adults and children over 12 years.
- Prescription medicines to stop nausea and vomiting are available for adults.

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

## Self care

### Babies

- As breast feeding protects against infection, keep breast feeding and offer the breast more often. Offer oral rehydration solution between feeds.
- If baby is bottle fed, offer normal strength formula or milk more frequently in smaller amounts and also offer oral rehydration fluid frequently in small amounts. Baby may need to stay off formula or milk for up to 12 hours. Never withhold formula or milk for longer than 24 hours and do not dilute it.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

- It may be necessary to try a lactose-free formula. Ask a pharmacist.
- Clean and sterilise babies' bottles, teats and dummies and items used to measure, mix or store liquids.
- Put made-up formula in the fridge promptly.
- Throw away leftover formula or milk.

## Children and adults

- Use rehydration solution to replace fluids.
- After vomiting stops keep sipping fluids and eat if hungry. Gradually re-introduce normal diet, avoiding sweet, fatty and spicy foods.
- Avoid undiluted sugary drinks – they can make diarrhoea worse.
- Keep sick children at home.

## Preventing 'gastro'

'Gastro' bugs get into food from unwashed hands, kitchen surfaces and eating utensils. Insist on hand-washing after going to the toilet, changing nappies, handling animals and before touching food. Use clean equipment for food preparation. To prevent gastro bugs growing in food, keep cooked food hot or put it in the fridge promptly.

## Related fact cards

- *Anxiety*
- *Irritable Bowel Syndrome*
- *Travel Health*

## For more information

**Health/Insite** – website [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

**Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)** leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

**NPS Medicines Line** – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

**The Poisons Information Centre** – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

**Pharmacy Self Care Support** – phone 1300 369 772 and ask for the Pharmacy Self Care Field Officer.

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

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