

Diarrhoea: A Guide for Parents of Babies and Children



Highlights

Diarrhoea is usually caused by an infection or virus.

Diarrhoea is a symptom that causes more frequent and loose bowel movements. Regularly wash your hands, particularly before feeding and after nappy changes, to reduce the spread of infection.

Medicines to reduce vomiting and diarrhoea are not recommended unless advised by a doctor.

Babies under 6 months old are at higher risk of dehydration and should be checked by a doctor if they have diarrhoea.

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What is diarrhoea?

Diarrhoea is a symptom where someone passes 3 or more loose or liquid stools (poos) per day. Poo that is soft, formed, and solid is not considered diarrhoea.

What is considered diarrhoea in babies?

Most babies have occasional loose stools. Breastfed babies tend to have looser stools than formula-fed babies. Diarrhoea in babies refers to frequent, unformed, watery poos, often caused by an infection such as gastroenteritis (a stomach bug), which is typically caused by a virus.

Signs of dehydration in babies include:

Lethargy

Irritability

Dry mouth

Pale or washed-out color

Reduced urine output

Difficulty feeding

Severe dehydration is a medical emergency and can be fatal.

What should I do if my baby has diarrhoea?

Continue giving breast milk or formula to prevent dehydration. Offer extra feeds if necessary.

Do not give medicines to reduce vomiting or diarrhoea, as they may be harmful.

Speak to a doctor or pharmacist about oral rehydration fluids.

Sterilize bottles carefully if your baby drinks from one.

Keep your baby away from other children until the diarrhoea stops.

When should my baby see a doctor?

Babies under 6 months old should be checked by a doctor if they have vomiting and diarrhoea, as they are at higher risk of dehydration.

Signs that your baby may need medical attention include:

Lethargy

Poor feeding

Fever

Less urine

Vomiting lasting more than a day

Sunken fontanelle

What is considered diarrhoea in toddlers and older children?

In children, diarrhoea refers to passing 3 or more loose or liquid stools per day. Some children between 1 and 5 years old may have frequent, smelly, loose stools that contain recognisable foods, which is known as "toddler diarrhoea." These children are usually healthy and growing normally.

What should I do if my child has diarrhoea?

Ensure your child drinks plenty of clear fluids to replace lost fluids.

Offer food only if your child wants it.

Avoid giving fruit juice or cordial, as these can worsen diarrhoea.

Do not give medicines for diarrhoea or vomiting. Consult a doctor or pharmacist about oral rehydration fluids.

When should my child see a doctor?

Take your child to the doctor if:

They are vomiting, have diarrhoea, and are not drinking.

They have frequent diarrhoea (8-10 watery poos, or 2-3 large poos per day), or if diarrhoea does not improve after 10 days.

They cannot keep any fluids down.

They show signs of dehydration (fewer wet nappies, dark yellow or brown urine, dry lips and mouth).

They have severe stomach pain, blood in their stools, or green vomit.

You are concerned.

Tools And Assistance

Here are some tips to prevent the spread of diarrhoea:

Your child should not return to school or childcare until at least 48 hours after the last bout of diarrhoea.

Wash hands frequently using liquid soap and warm water, and dry with a clean towel.

Keep toilets clean and wash towels frequently.

Make sure everyone in the family washes their hands regularly with soap and warm water.

Do not share towels.