

# Diarrhea

Reviewed by SickKids Staff | Last updated: October 30th 2019

Diarrhea causes frequent, loose bowel movements. Read about the causes of diarrhea in babies and children, how to take care of them, and how to prevent dehydration.

## Key points

- Diarrhea is frequent bowel movements and loose or watery stool.
- Diarrhea can cause dehydration.
- Signs of dehydration include dry mouth, sunken eyes, not peeing often and low energy.
- When your child has diarrhea, continue with their regular diet. Give plenty of fluids.
- If your child is a baby check with the doctor about giving certain fluids.
- Talk to your doctor before giving your child an oral rehydration solution to prevent dehydration.
- Talk to your doctor if your child is not able to drink fluids, has blood in their stool, or has pain that does not go away.
- Talk to your doctor if your child seems to be getting sicker.

## What is diarrhea?

Diarrhea is when your child has watery stool that is more frequent than their usual number of stools. There are many different causes of diarrhea. In children, it is most often caused by a virus that infects the lining of the intestines, called [gastroenteritis](#). Other causes include bacterial infections, parasitic infections, food poisoning or medications such as antibiotics. Diarrhea caused by antibiotics is known as [antibiotic-associated diarrhea](#). Diarrhea is also caused by medical conditions that affect how food is absorbed from the intestines.



During the first few months of life, it is normal for many breastfed babies to have bowel movements with very loose stool. This is unlikely diarrhea.

## Signs and symptoms of severe diarrhea

Signs of diarrhea include:

- sudden increase in the number of bowel movements
- stool that contains mucus or blood
- stool with a very bad smell

Severe diarrhea can be harmful because it causes dehydration. [Dehydration](#) is a loss of fluid in the body. Infants can lose too much fluid very quickly.

Signs of dehydration include:

- dry mouth
- fewer tears when crying
- sunken eyes
- not urinating (peeing) as often as usual or less than three times per day
- dark urine
- sunken fontanelle (the "soft spot" on the top of the baby's head) in babies less than a year old
- low energy

### Diarrhea can last up to one week

Diarrhea can last from one to seven days. During this time, give your child plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration. Your child should continue eating to keep healthy. Talk to your doctor if diarrhea continues for more than two to three weeks.

## Infectious diarrhea spreads easily

Diarrhea caused by viruses and other infections is very contagious. Wash yours and your child's hands well with soap and water after every trip to the bathroom or diaper change. Children are considered contagious for as long as they have diarrhea.

## How to take care of your child with diarrhea at home

In general, the best treatment for diarrhea is to prevent dehydration by giving your child plenty of fluids.

## Diarrhea in babies less than 6 months old

Breastfed babies should continue to breastfeed while they have diarrhea. If you need to stop breastfeeding for any reason, make sure to pump your breasts until you can start breastfeeding again.

Formula-fed babies should continue to take their usual formula while they have diarrhea. Do not dilute the formula.

If you think your baby has diarrhea and is not [vomiting](#), continue breastfeeding or offer their usual formula, but offer the feedings more frequently.

Do not give other types of liquids, such as juice, rice water, sports drinks, tea or homemade drinks to your baby.

If the diarrhea is very severe or you notice signs of dehydration, you may give your child an oral rehydration solution (ORS), such as Pedialyte or Enfalyte. Give the ORS after or between feedings. The ORS should NOT replace breast milk.

If your baby is not drinking as much as usual, use a dropper to give either expressed breast milk, formula or ORS. Give your baby 1 teaspoon (5 mL) of fluid every three minutes. Increase the amount as tolerated.

## Diarrhea in babies who eat solid foods

If your baby eats solid foods and has diarrhea, continue with their regular diet.

## Diarrhea in toddlers and children

If the diarrhea is mild, limit your child's intake of juice, ginger ale and other soft drinks. These drinks contain sugars that can make the diarrhea worse. Drinks with caffeine, such as colas, also make diarrhea worse.

If the diarrhea is frequent and very watery, give your child plenty of fluids. If your child is showing signs of dehydration, you can give them diluted apple juice (half apple juice and half water) or their preferred liquid. You may also give your child ORS (such as Pedialyte, Enfalyte or Pediatric Electrolyte).

Sometimes your child can develop a temporary lactose intolerance and diarrhea may worsen after drinking milk. Your child can try drinking lactose-free milk for one to two weeks until their gut heals.

Your child should keep eating solid foods while they have diarrhea. Good nutrition will help their recovery.

### **Treating diaper rash**

Diarrhea can be very irritating to the skin of the diaper area. Apply creams or ointments to your child's skin to reduce [diaper rash](#). Use zinc-containing ointments. Clean your child's skin immediately after each bowel movement. Then, apply a very thick layer of protective ointment.

## **Do not give medicine for diarrhea unless your doctor says to do so**

There are no proven safe and effective prescription or over-the-counter medications for diarrhea caused by viruses. Some medication can cause excessive sleepiness, worsen cramping or cause other problems. Others may be unsafe for children.

Antibiotics can make diarrhea worse. They can interfere with healthy bacteria that live in the gut.

Do not give your child a medicine for diarrhea without talking to your doctor.

## **When to see a doctor**

**Make an appointment with your child's regular doctor if:**

- your child is showing mild signs of dehydration but can drink some fluids
- your child has been vomiting more than 48 hours
- your child is less than three months of age
- your child has fever and is older than three months old
- your child has mucus in the diarrhea
- your child has severe diarrhea (more than eight times per day) for more than two days
- your child has mild diarrhea for more than two weeks

**Go to the nearest Emergency Department or call 911 if:**

- your child is showing signs of dehydration and is not able to drink fluids
- your child has vomit or diarrhea that is green or bloody
- your child has severe abdominal (belly) pain that is getting worse and is not relieved by passing stool
- your child appears to be very sick
- your child has a fever and/or diarrhea that does not go away, and is less than three months of age

Please visit [AboutKidsHealth.ca](https://AboutKidsHealth.ca) for more child health information.  
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