



Pharmaceutical
Society of Australia



Vomiting and Diarrhoea

Vomiting and diarrhoea are often caused by a gastrointestinal (gut) infection. The body can lose a lot of fluid and quickly 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

Although gastrointestinal infections are a common cause, vomiting and diarrhoea can be symptoms of a range of medical conditions. Other symptoms that often occur with vomiting and diarrhoea include nausea, poor appetite, abdominal pain, fever and fatigue.

Causes of vomiting and/or diarrhoea include:

- Viral gut infection – viral gastroenteritis (e.g., rotavirus) is a common cause of vomiting and diarrhoea. Vomiting may settle quickly, while diarrhoea may continue a little longer
- Bacterial gut infection – bacterial gastroenteritis (e.g., salmonella, campylobacter) can result from eating contaminated food (food poisoning). Symptoms usually start 12-48 hours after eating the food
- Parasite gut infection (e.g., giardia)
- Non-gastrointestinal infections (e.g., ear infection, blood poisoning)
- Some medical conditions (e.g., appendicitis, irritable bowel syndrome, inflammatory bowel disease)
- Some medicines (e.g., antibiotics, orlistat)
- Food intolerance (e.g., lactose)
- 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 may impair 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.

Treatment of vomiting and diarrhoea

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

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 rehydration solution' to replace body salts, glucose and water (e.g., *HYDRALyte*, *Gastrolyte*, *ORS*, *Pedialyte*, *Repalyte*, *Restore*). 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. Carefully follow product directions for mixing, storage and use. 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 and weight.
- Juice, cordial or soft drinks (e.g., lemonade) should only be used as fluid replacement if symptoms are very 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 for adults from a pharmacist.
- Prescription medicines to relieve nausea and vomiting are available for adults.

Self care

Babies

- As breastfeeding protects against infection, continue breastfeeding 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 offer oral rehydration solution 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.
- 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.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

- Put made-up formula in the fridge promptly.
- Throw away leftover formula or milk.

Children and adults

- Use oral rehydration solution to replace fluids.
- If necessary, stop solid foods for a short time. Do not withhold solid food from a child for longer than 24 hours.
- After vomiting stops keep sipping fluids and eat if hungry. Gradually reintroduce normal diet, avoiding sweet, fatty and spicy foods.
- Avoid undiluted sugary drinks – they can make diarrhoea worse.
- Keep sick children at home.

Preventing 'gastro' infection

Gut infections (infectious gastroenteritis) can be caused by ingesting contaminated food or fluids. To help protect against infection:

- Wash hands well with soap and water after going to the toilet, changing nappies, handling animals and before touching food
- Use clean surfaces and equipment to prepare and serve food
- Promptly refrigerate food that needs to be kept cold (e.g., meat, milk, cheese)
- Cook food thoroughly and keep cooked food hot (above 60°C) or refrigerate it promptly
- Do not drink or swim in contaminated water.

Related fact cards

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

For more information

HEALTH/Insite – website 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.

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

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