

Facts about Diarrhea

Diarrhea is a common problem in children. It is usually mild and lasts for a short time.

Every child has a different pattern of bowel movements, so it is sometimes hard to tell if a child has diarrhea or just loose bowel movements. It is diarrhea:

- if the child has more, loose bowel movements than usual, OR
- if the bowel movements are more watery or unformed than usual.

Sometimes diarrhea can be severe, especially in very young children. A child with diarrhea may feel sick to the stomach and not want to eat. The child may also have a fever, stomach pains or cramps. There can be blood or mucus in the bowel movements.

Diarrhea is usually caused by a virus. Sometimes diarrhea is caused by bacteria and can be treated with antibiotics.

Diarrhea can be harmful to your child because of the danger of dehydration. Dehydration occurs when too much fluid is lost from the body. Children with diarrhea must drink enough fluids so they don't become dehydrated.

(See: Feeding a Child with Diarrhea, page 21)

How is Diarrhea Spread?

Germs that cause diarrhea spread easily from person to person and especially from child to child through contact with feces, contaminated surfaces or in food or water. To stop the spread, wash your hands and the child's hands carefully after every diaper change. Make sure that children wash their hands after using the toilet. Wash hands often and always before preparing or eating food.

Refer to Guidelines for Cleaning Spills of Blood & Body Fluids on page 14.

What to Do at Home

- Watch your child for signs of diarrhea if other children have it.
- Make sure everyone in the house, including your child, washes their hands after using the toilet and after diaper changes.
- Wash hands often and always before preparing or eating food.
- Use a different towel, facecloth, dish, spoon, etc. for each person to stop the germs from spreading.

When to Call Your Doctor or 811

Call your doctor if your child has diarrhea and is **any of the following:**

- under 6 months of age
- has bloody or black bowel movements
- has a temperature of 38.5°C or higher
- has signs of dehydration (see below)



Signs of Dehydration

- decreased urination (fewer than 4 wet diapers in 24 hours)
- increased thirst
- no tears
- dry skin, mouth and tongue
- fast heartbeat
- sunken eyes
- greyish skin
- sunken soft spot on baby's head

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Feeding a Child With Diarrhea

Talk to your doctor or Public Health Nurse, if you have any questions about what to feed a child with diarrhea. Here are some suggestions:

If your child is less than 6 months old:

- Keep breastfeeding, but you may also give the baby extra fluids.
- If your baby is on formula, follow the directions on the package carefully. Do not boil, thicken, or make formula stronger, because the child may become more dehydrated.
- Talk to your doctor about using an oral rehydration solution, such as Pedialyte™ or Pediatric Electrolyte (See: Note on Oral Rehydration Solutions).
- Don't give your baby plain water, unless your doctor specifies an amount.

If your child is more than 6 months old:

- Remember, a child with diarrhea may not feel like eating, but it is important to try to get your child to drink as much as possible.
- If your child is still breastfeeding, continue breastfeeding.
- Try to avoid sugary drinks, such as pop, fruit juice, sweetened fruit drinks or sweetened tea; sugar can make the diarrhea worse.
- Offer your child an oral rehydration solution, such as Pedialyte™ or Pediatric Electrolyte (See: Note on Oral Rehydration Solutions).
- Here are some foods that are okay for your child to eat:

bananas	rice
noodles	potatoes
meats	cereals, especially rice cereals
- You can offer an older child plain water to drink as long as the child is eating food.
- Allow your child to drink as much fluid as he or she wants.

Note: Oral Rehydration Solutions

Oral rehydration solutions are exact mixtures of water, salts and sugar. They help replace lost fluids. These solutions can be absorbed even when your child is vomiting. They come in different flavours. You can buy a ready-to-use liquid, a powder that must be mixed with water, and frozen popsicles. Offer small amounts often, using a spoon or dropper for infants. Do not use oral rehydration solutions as the sole source of fluid for more than 12-24 hours.

Sports drinks, such as Gatorade™, contain more sugar than a child needs and may make diarrhea worse.

If you have any questions about oral rehydration solutions, talk to your doctor.

Do not give your child any medicine unless your doctor suggests it.



A child with diarrhea should not go to the child care centre. This includes:

- Any episode of bloody diarrhea
- More loose bowel movements than usual, or bowel movements that are more watery or unformed than usual (2 or more liquid or watery stools within a 24 hour period).
- A child with diarrhea should not go to school if the bowel movements are loose and there is a risk of spreading germs from the diarrhea to surfaces used by others in the school.