Let's Talk About...

Dehydration and feeding problems due to respiratory illness in infants

What is dehydration?

Dehydration (Dee-hi-dray-shun) means that your infant's body does not have as much water or fluids as it should.

What causes dehydration?

- Your infant may not eat or drink enough because:
  - He has a stuffy nose.
  - He is breathing very fast.
  - He is not hungry because he is sick.
  - He has a sore throat and refuses to eat.
  - He is nauseated and refuses to eat.
- Your infant may loose too much fluid because:
  - He is vomiting or he has diarrhea.
  - He has a fever or he is sweating a lot.

What causes dehydration in respiratory illness?

When your infant's nose is stuffed up, he can't breathe through his nose. He has to breathe through his mouth. This makes it very hard to suck on a bottle and breathe at the same time. (See the parent handout ***Let's Talk About... Bronchiolitis and RSV***.)

How do I recognize dehydration in my infant?

- Your infant has a dry mouth or the spit in his mouth is thick.
- There is just a small amount of dark urine in his diaper.
- Your infant has less than one wet diaper every 6-8 hours.
- The soft spot (fontanel) on his head sinks in when he is held up or sits up.
- Your infant has dry or wrinkled skin.
- Your infant has dark circles around his eyes.
- He may be fussy, sleepy, not hungry or difficult to wake up.
- If you notice any of these things, start keeping a record of the following things. This will help your doctor treat your infant. Keep a record of:
  - Everything he eats and drinks.
  - The number of wet diapers you have changed in the last day.
  - The color of his urine.
  - The number of bowel movements he has had and what they are like (color and how hard or soft they are).

If your infant is not taking or keeping down any fluids, call your doctor!

If you think your infant has dehydration, call your doctor immediately or go to the Emergency Room or other clinic!

How can I help my infant?

- Check your infant's breathing rate by counting the number of times he breathes in one minute. If your infant takes a breath more than 60 times in a minute and this goes on for more than 45 minutes, do not feed your infant. Call your doctor right away. You should not feed your infant if he is breathing this fast because he might take food into his lungs. This is called aspiration (ass-per-ray-shun). This is when food or drink goes down the windpipe. This can lead to infections in the lungs (pneumonia) and even more trouble breathing.
- To help your baby breathe more normally, try bulb suctioning your baby's nose. (See the parent handout: ***Lets Talk About... How to use a suction bulb***.) After bulb suctioning, wait 15 minutes. If your baby is still breathing faster than 60 breaths in a minute, do not feed him and call your doctor.
- If your child frequently coughs, turns blue, makes sputtering sounds or seems to be choking while eating: stop feeding him and call your doctor immediately.

Being admitted to the hospital for dehydration

If your infant has been unable to drink or keep down enough fluids, he may become dehydrated and require admission to the hospital. If he is admitted to the hospital, the nurse may place a small tube in a vein called an "I.V." to give your infant fluids. (See the parent handout: ***Let's Talk About…Placing an I.V.***) This treatment is temporary until your infant can drink and keep down enough fluids.

He may also have a feeding tube. A small, soft tube is placed into his nose and guided to his stomach. Food can then be given through the tube. (See the parent handout: ***Let's Talk About…Gavage feeding for babies.***)

Going home from the hospital after admission

Infants admitted to the hospital for dehydration can usually go home when they drink enough fluid and are able to keep it down, have plenty of wet diapers, and breathe normally. Every once in a while, an infant may be sent home with a feeding tube.

Intermountain
Primary Children's
Medical Center
Healing for life℠

Pediatric Education Services
801.662.3500 Rev. 08/10

© Primary Children's Medical Center 2010

All of the information contained in the ***Let's Talk About . . .*** series is for educational purposes only. This educational information is not a substitute for medical advice or for care from a physician or other health care professional. If you have questions about your child's health, contact your health care provider.