

Diarrhea and Dehydration

What are diarrhea and dehydration?

Diarrhea [die-uh-REE-uh] is when your child has loose, watery stool (poop) and has more bowel movements than usual. Your child might also have a fever, vomiting (throw up), or cramping (belly pain) with diarrhea. Diarrhea is usually caused by a virus but it can also be caused by bacteria, food poisoning, problems with digesting some foods, or a reaction to a medication.

Dehydration [dee-hi-DRAY-shun] is when your child loses too much liquid from their body because of diarrhea or vomiting. Dehydration can cause your child to lose salt and other important minerals called **electrolytes** [ih-LEK-truh-lites], which can cause other health problems. Dehydration is dangerous for children and babies because they need more liquid per pound of body weight than adults.

What are the signs and symptoms of dehydration?

Your child may be dehydrated if they are not urinating (peeing) often enough or if they have dark-colored urine. A baby younger than 1 year should have 6 to 8 wet diapers in a 24-hour period. An older child usually urinates every 6 to 8 hours. Your child may also be more tired than usual or their eyes may be sunken or dry (no tears).

More serious signs and symptoms include:

- Sinking in the soft spot on top of a baby's head
- Dry mouth (no spit)
- Dry or wrinkled skin
- Not urinating for 12 hours
- A cool feeling of the arms, hands, legs, and feet
- Blotchy or bluish skin



How do I treat my child's diarrhea and dehydration?

For diarrhea

A child younger than 1 year: Continue breast or formula feeding.

A child older than 1 year: Feed them foods that are easy to digest, such as bread, crackers, mashed potatoes, cooked cereals, pasta, and applesauce. Do not feed your child fatty or greasy foods while they have diarrhea.

If your child has mild diarrhea, they can have regular foods and drinks. Keep checking your child for signs of dehydration when they have diarrhea.

For dehydration

A child younger than 1 year: Give Pedialyte between breast or formula feedings. Pedialyte has a good balance of water, sugar, and salts that the body needs. Do not give your baby plain water if they are dehydrated. Water does not have the salts and sugars your child's body needs when they are dehydrated.

A child older than 1 year: Give Pedialyte. If your child will not drink Pedialyte, give your child a drink that is half sports drink (Gatorade, Powerade) and half water. Full-strength sports drinks have too much sugar and cause diarrhea.

Soda, juice, and other sugary drinks can make diarrhea worse. Avoid them if possible.

What if my child is vomiting?

If your child is vomiting often, stop feeding formula and solid foods.

If younger than 1 year: Give your child small amounts of Pedialyte every 15 to 30 minutes.

If older than 1 year: Give your child a drink that is half sports drink (Gatorade, Powerade) and half water every 15 to 30 minutes.

If it has been 6 hours since they threw up, you may feed your child formula or solid foods. Keep checking your child for signs of dehydration.

What happens in the hospital?

In the emergency department: Healthcare providers may order blood tests to make sure your child's electrolytes are normal.

If your child cannot drink liquids or is dehydrated, they may be given an IV (a tiny tube that goes into a vein). The IV will provide your child liquids and electrolytes.

If admitted to the hospital: The IV will remain in place. Your child's blood will be tested regularly to make sure the IV liquids are working.

Usually, a child who is dehydrated will stay in the hospital for 1 to 4 days. They can go home when they feel better and can drink clear liquids.

What other problems can be caused by dehydration?

Other problems that can sometimes happen with dehydration include:

- Sleepiness
- Low amounts of sugar in the blood
- Less circulation of blood to the body
- More vomiting or diarrhea
- An irregular heartbeat pattern due to low levels of electrolytes

If these problems are not treated, they can make your child very sick, cause seizures (convulsions), or make their kidneys stop working.

When should I call my child's provider?

Call your child's healthcare provider if they:

- Do not urinate for 12 hours
- Are very sleepy and won't respond, or are very irritable and won't stop crying
- Have diarrhea that lasts more than 1 day
- Have only had liquids for more than 1 day
- Have any signs of dehydration (see page 1)
- Have bloody diarrhea or are vomiting
- Have green vomit or vomit clear fluids
- Have severe belly pain or swelling
- Have a fever of greater than 100.4°F (38.0°C) if they are younger than 1 year, or greater than 104°F (40°C) if they are older than 1 year