

Let's Talk About...

Diarrhea and Dehydration

What is diarrhea?

Diarrhea is when your child has more bowel movements than usual and they are more watery than usual. Your child might also have fever, vomit, or have cramping with the diarrhea. Diarrhea is usually caused by a virus. Diarrhea may also be caused by bacteria, food poisoning, problems with digesting some foods, or a reaction to a medicine.

What is dehydration?

Dehydration is when your child loses too much liquid from their body. This is usually from diarrhea or vomiting. A person with dehydration can also lose too much salt from their body. Dehydration can be dangerous for children and especially for babies because their bodies need more liquid per pound than adults do.

How do I know if my child has dehydration?

Your child has a small amount of urine (pee) or dark-yellow colored urine. A baby less than one year old should have six to eight wet diapers in a 24-hour period. An older child will usually urinate (pee) every six to eight hours.

- Your child is more tired than usual.
- Your child's eyes are sunken or dry (no tears).
- More serious symptoms are:
 - The soft spot on top of a baby's head sinks down.
 - Your child's mouth is dry (no spit).
 - Your child's skin is dry or wrinkled.
 - Your child doesn't make urine (pee) for 12 hours or more.
 - Your child's arms, hands, legs and feet feel cool to touch.
 - Skin appears blotchy or bluish in color.

What should I do for my child if they have diarrhea?

- If your child is an infant, continue breast or formula feeding. If your child is older, feed them food that is easy to digest such as bread, crackers, mashed potatoes, cooked cereals, pasta, and applesauce.
- Avoid fatty or greasy foods while your child has diarrhea.
- If your child has mild diarrhea, they can have regular foods and drinks.
- Continue to check your child for signs of dehydration.

What should I do for my child's dehydration?

- If you think your child has dehydration and is under one year of age, give Pedialyte® between breast or formula feeds. Pedialyte® has a good balance of water, sugar, and salts that the body needs.
- If you think your child has dehydration and is older than one year of age:
 - Give them Pedialyte®. If your child will not drink Pedialyte®, give Gatorade®, Powerade®, or another sports drink mixed half and half with water to make it half strength.
 - To make a drink half strength, fill a cup half full with sports drink and then add the same amount of water. Full strength sports drinks have too much sugar and make diarrhea worse.
 - Don't give your child soda, juice, or similar drinks with lots of sugar. They can make the diarrhea worse.

- If your child is vomiting often:
 - Stop feeding formula and solid foods.
 - If an infant, feed small amounts of Pedialyte® every 15–30 minutes.
 - If your child is older than an infant, feed small amounts of half-strength Gatorade® or sports drinks every 15–30 minutes.
 - Feed your child formula or solid foods only after it has been six hours since they threw up.
- Continue to check your child for signs of dehydration.

What happens in the hospital?

In the Emergency Department, the nurses and doctors will check your child’s blood to make sure the salts in the blood (electrolytes) are normal. Severe diarrhea can change the amount of electrolytes in the blood. If the electrolytes are not normal it could be dangerous.

If your child cannot drink liquids or if dehydrated, the doctor may order an IV (a tiny tube inserted into a vein). This IV will give your child liquids and salts. Your child will probably keep the IV in place for a while if admitted to the hospital. The doctor will order frequent tests of your child’s blood.

Usually, a child who has dehydration will stay in the hospital for one to four days. Your child can go home when they feel better and can drink clear liquids.

Are there other problems that could happen?

- Sleepiness.
- Low amounts of sugar in the blood.
- Less circulation of blood to the body.
- More vomiting or diarrhea, or a different heartbeat pattern because of electrolyte levels that are not normal.
- If these problems are not treated, they can make your child very sick, have seizures (convulsions), or the kidneys could stop working.

When should I call my child’s doctor?

Call the doctor if you observe any of the following in your child:

- does not urinate (pee) for 12 hours or more.
- is very sleepy and won’t respond. Or the opposite, your child is very irritable.
- has diarrhea lasting more than one day.
- can’t eat anything but liquids for more than one day.
- has any signs of dehydration as discussed in this handout.
- has blood in diarrhea or vomit.
- has green vomit or is vomiting all clear fluids.
- has severe belly pain or swelling.
- has a fever with a temperature more than 104°F (40°C). If your child is an infant, and the fever is more than 100.4°F (38.0°C).