

Vomiting and Diarrhoea

Vomiting and diarrhoea (loose, watery bowel motions) are often caused by a gastrointestinal (gut) infection. Our bodies 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. Special oral rehydration solutions are the best fluids to drink. Ask a pharmacist for advice.

Main causes

Gastrointestinal infection (often called gastroenteritis or 'gastro') is a common cause, but vomiting and diarrhoea can also be symptoms of a range of medical conditions. Other symptoms that often occur with vomiting and diarrhoea include nausea, poor appetite, stomach pain, fever and tiredness.

Causes of vomiting and/or diarrhoea include:

- viral gut infection (e.g. rotavirus)
- bacterial gut infection (e.g. salmonella, campylobacter) – can be caused by infected food or water – symptoms of 'food poisoning' usually start within 24 hours of eating infected food
- parasite gut infection (e.g. giardia)
- non-gastrointestinal infections (e.g. ear infection, urinary tract infection)

- some medical conditions (e.g. appendicitis, irritable bowel syndrome, inflammatory bowel disease)
- some medicines (e.g. antibiotics, orlistat, cancer chemotherapy)
- food intolerance (e.g. lactose)
- alcohol
- anxiety.

Risks

- Dehydration can develop rapidly, especially in the very young and the elderly. Severe dehydration can be fatal.
- Diarrhoea can cause temporary bowel damage, which may interfere with the digestion of the lactose in dairy products. Avoid dairy products if they make diarrhoea worse.

Signs of dehydration

Dehydration means there is not enough water in the body. Signs of dehydration include:

- thirst
- dark urine
- little or no urine passed
- dry mouth, tongue and lips
- no tears
- skin stays up when pinched
- muscle cramps
- feeling tired, lightheaded, irritable
- headache
- changed breathing – fast or deep
- an irritable, sleepy or ‘floppy’ child
- the ‘soft spot’ on the top of a baby’s head is more sunken than usual.

Treatment of vomiting and diarrhoea

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

Rehydration

The most important treatment for vomiting and diarrhoea is to replace the fluid that is being lost. ‘Oral rehydration solutions’, which contain the correct balance of water, body salts and glucose are the best fluids to use.

- Begin replacing fluid as soon as vomiting or diarrhoea starts.
- Use ‘oral rehydration solution’ (e.g. *HYDRALyte*, *Gastrolyte*, *Gluco-lyte*, *ORS*, *Pedialyte*, *Repalyte*, *Restore*). ‘Oral rehydration’ products are available from pharmacies as solutions, ice blocks and tablets/powder for mixing in water.

- Carefully follow ‘oral rehydration’ product directions for mixing, storage and use. The balance of water, glucose and body salts in rehydration solutions is important. Use a readymade product if you are not confident about making the solution yourself.
- Sip or suck small amounts of oral rehydration solution often, and after vomiting or a runny bowel motion.
- Drink enough fluid to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine ‘light-coloured’. To replace lost fluid, most people need to drink more than usual.

Juice, cordial or soft drinks (e.g. lemonade) may be used to replace fluid if vomiting and diarrhoea are very mild. The juice, cordial or soft drink must be well-diluted with water. Do not use ‘diet’ drinks, ‘sports’ drinks or ‘energy’ drinks.

Medicines

Non-prescription medicines available from a pharmacist include:

- medicines to control diarrhoea (e.g. loperamide) – for adults only
- probiotics (e.g. *Lactobacillus*) – may help relieve diarrhoea caused by viral ‘gastro’ infection.

Prescription medicines to relieve nausea and vomiting are also available.

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, give oral rehydration solution in place of formula at first. Restart normal strength formula or milk when vomiting has eased, and also offer small amounts of oral rehydration solution often.
- Restart usual strength formula or simple solid foods as soon as vomiting stops and within 24 hours, or seek medical advice.
- It may be necessary to try a lactose-free formula or milk. Ask a pharmacist.
- Always clean and sterilise babies' bottles, teats and dummies, and items used to measure, mix or store liquids.
- Always put made-up formula in the fridge without delay.
- Always throw away leftover formula or milk.

Children and adults

- Use oral rehydration solution to replace lost fluids.
- If necessary, stop solid foods for a short time. Do not hold back solid food from a child for longer than 24 hours.
- After vomiting stops keep sipping fluids and eat if hungry. Gradually re-introduce normal diet, avoiding sweet, fatty and spicy foods.
- Avoid drinks containing a lot of sugar – they can make diarrhoea worse.
- Stay at home when ill.

Important

Seek medical advice if the patient:

- is a baby less than 6 months old or is elderly
- is pregnant
- has signs of dehydration
- cannot keep any fluids down
- is not drinking
- has been vomiting for more than 24 hours
- has had diarrhoea for more than a few days
- vomits blood, or brown or green bile
- has bloody or black faeces (bowel motions)
- has severe pain in the abdomen (belly) or rectum
- has a high fever (over 38°C)
- is losing weight
- has a weakened immune system
- has an underlying medical condition (e.g. diabetes, epilepsy).

Preventing 'gastro' infection

Gut infections can be caused by eating infected food, or drinking or using infected water or other fluids. To help protect against infection:

- Wash hands well with soap and water after going to the toilet, changing nappies, gardening or handling animals, and before touching food. If you can't wash your hands, use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser.
- Use clean surfaces and equipment to prepare and serve food.
- Wash hands and equipment immediately after handling raw meats.
- Promptly refrigerate food that needs to be kept cold (e.g. meat, milk, cheese).
- Cook food right through, and keep it hot (above 60°C) or refrigerate it without delay.
- Do not drink or swim in contaminated water.

For more information

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthdirect.org.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

NPS Medicine Wise

Medicines Information Line

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

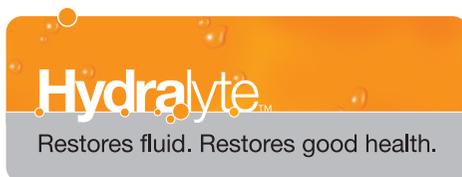
In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26
from anywhere in Australia.

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

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