

Fact Sheet: Childhood Diarrhea

What is diarrhea?

Diarrhea is the passage of loose or watery stools that may contain blood, pus or mucus. Children with diarrhea often have additional symptoms including nausea, vomiting, stomachaches, headaches and fever. Diarrhea can be acute (happens suddenly, and for brief periods) or chronic (an ongoing and persistent medical problem). Diarrhea can affect the ability of the body to process and absorb necessary water, salts and nutrients and can lead to dehydration, shock and even death.

Mild, acute diarrhea can be caused by a number of conditions including:

- A change in dietary habits, such as eating rich or different foods
- Food allergies
- Taking medicines, such as antibiotics

Serious, acute diarrhea can be caused by a variety of viruses, bacteria and parasites, including:

- Rotavirus
- E. coli O157:H7
- Salmonella
- Certain respiratory infections

Viruses cause most episodes of acute diarrhea in children. Diarrheal illness can be seasonal or may occur in outbreaks where many people are affected.

How is it spread?

Children and adults can become infected by coming in direct contact with the bowel movements of an infected child and then passing the infection to the mouth (fecal-oral transmission). Often, another child or adult touches a surface that has been contaminated, touches his or her mouth and then ingests the germs. A child with a diarrheal illness may be contagious before the onset of diarrhea and for a few days after the diarrhea has ended. Germs that cause diarrhea can also be spread by contaminated food.

How is it treated?

Dehydration is the biggest threat from diarrheal diseases in children. Illnesses that cause diarrhea or vomiting can lead to dehydration if the child loses more body fluids and salts (electrolytes) than he/she takes in. To prevent dehydration, your child may require special fluids.

- The best fluid to give children with diarrhea is an oral rehydration solution such as CeraLyte, Pedialyte or Oralyte. These solutions can be purchased in nearly all drug stores and grocery stores. Parents should keep 2 bottles or packages of these solutions on hand in case your child gets diarrhea. Follow the instructions on the solution according to your child's age.
- Sports drinks **do not** replace the fluid losses correctly and should **not** be used for the treatment of diarrheal illness.
- Children who are breastfeeding, taking formula, or eating solids should continue to follow their usual diet.

The best chance to prevent dehydration, hospitalization or death from diarrheal diseases is by making sure children receive enough fluids, and by seeking medical care when diarrhea is severe or you are concerned about dehydration. It is vital to replace fluids properly. Your health care provider can help you decide what is right for your child.

Are antibiotics needed to treat diarrheal diseases?

Do not be surprised if your doctor does not prescribe an antibiotic to treat a diarrheal illness. Many diarrheal illnesses are caused by viruses and will improve in two or three days **without** antibiotics. In fact, antibiotics have no effect on viruses, and using an antibiotic to treat a viral infection could cause harm. Antibiotics are often not needed to treat mild bacterial infections.

When should you call a doctor if your child has diarrhea?

Contact your health care provider if diarrhea is accompanied by the following (particularly if your child is less than 6 months of age):

- High fever (temperature over 100.5 °F, measured orally, 101. 5 °F axillary, or 99. 5 °F rectally)
- Blood in bowel movement
- Prolonged vomiting that prevents keeping liquids down (which can lead to dehydration)
- Signs of dehydration, including
 - ✓ Decrease in urination
 - ✓ Sunken eyes
 - ✓ No tears when child cries
 - ✓ Extreme thirst
 - ✓ Unusual drowsiness or fussiness
 - ✓ Dry, sticky mouth, cracked lips

How is it prevented?

- Careful and frequent hand washing can prevent the spread of infection to other people.
- Adults should wash their hands after using the toilet, helping a child use the toilet or diapering a child, and before preparing, serving, or eating food.
- Children should wash their hands after using the toilet, after having their diapers changed (an adult should wash infant's or small child's hands), and before eating snacks or meals.
- Disinfect toys, bathrooms, and food preparation surfaces frequently, especially if a sick child has been in the home. A solution made using 1 part household bleach mixed with 10 parts water can be used to clean surfaces and toys. This solution should be made fresh daily.
- Use diapers with waterproof outer covers.
- Make sure that children wear clothes over diapers.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self -diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.



Visit our website at: <http://publichealth.eWashtenaw.org>

Or the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention at: www.cdc.gov

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