

Diarrhea: Children (age 3 and older)

What is diarrhea?

Diarrhea is the sudden increase in the frequency and looseness of stools. Mild diarrhea is the passage of a few loose or mushy stools. Severe diarrhea is the passage of many watery stools. The best indicator of the severity of the diarrhea is its frequency.

The main complication of diarrhea is dehydration from the loss of too much fluid from the body. Symptoms of dehydration are a dry mouth, the absence of tears, infrequent urination (for example, none in 12 hours), and a darker, concentrated urine. The main goal of diarrhea treatment is to prevent dehydration.

What is the cause?

Diarrhea is usually caused by a viral infection of the lining of the intestines (gastroenteritis). Sometimes it is caused by bacteria or parasites. Occasionally a food allergy or drinking too much fruit juice may cause diarrhea. If your child has just one or two loose stools, the cause is probably something your child ate. A diet of nothing but clear fluids for more than 2 days may cause green, watery stools (called "starvation stools").

How long will it last?

Diarrhea from a viral infection usually lasts several days to 2 weeks, regardless of the type of treatment. The main goal of treatment is to prevent dehydration. Your child needs to drink enough fluids to replace the fluids lost in the diarrhea. Don't expect a quick return to solid stools.

What should I feed my child?

Increased fluids and dietary changes are the main treatment for diarrhea.

Note: One loose stool can mean nothing. Don't start dietary changes until your child has had several loose stools.

Mild diarrhea (loose stools)

Follow a regular diet with a few simple changes. Your child should:

- Eat more foods containing starch. Starchy foods are easily digested during diarrhea. Examples are cereal, breads, crackers, rice, mashed potatoes, and pasta.
- Drink normal amounts of milk. Drink extra water.
- Avoid all fruit juices.
- Avoid beans or any other foods that cause loose stools.

Add a probiotic to the diet. Probiotics contain healthy bacteria (*lactobacilli*) that can replace unhealthy bacteria in the GI tract. Yogurt is the easiest source of

probiotics. If your child is over 12 months old, give 2 to 6 ounces (60 to 180 ml) of yogurt twice daily.

Severe diarrhea

- **Fluids**

Encourage your child to drink lots of fluids to prevent dehydration. Offer water and milk. Avoid fruit juices, because they all make diarrhea worse. If your child refuses to eat solid food, give your child milk rather than water.

- **Foods**

Keep giving your child food while he has diarrhea. The choice of food is important. Starchy and soft foods are digested best. Good food choices when your child has diarrhea are dried cereals, grains, bread, crackers, rice, pasta, mashed potatoes, and bananas. Pretzels or saltine crackers can help meet your child's need for sodium. Soft-boiled eggs or yogurt are easily digested and provide some protein.

How can I take care of my child?

There is no effective, safe drug for diarrhea. Extra fluids and diet therapy work best.

- **Probiotics**

Probiotics contain healthy bacteria (*lactobacilli*) that can replace unhealthy bacteria in the GI tract.

Yogurt is the easiest source of probiotics. Give your child 2 to 6 ounces (60 to 180 ml) of yogurt twice daily. Today almost all yogurts are “active culture”, which means that they contain live and active bacteria.

Probiotic supplements in granules, tablets, or capsules are also available in health food stores.

- **Common mistakes**

Kool-Aid and soda pop should be avoided because they contain no salt and too much sugar. Use only the fluids suggested here.

Fruit juices should be avoided because they are too concentrated and make the diarrhea worse.

The most dangerous myth is that the intestine should be "put to rest." Restricting fluids can cause dehydration.

- **Prevention**

Diarrhea can be very contagious. Always wash your hands after changing diapers or using the toilet. Children should wash their hands as well. This is crucial for keeping everyone in the family from getting diarrhea.

- **Vomiting with diarrhea**

If your child has vomited more than twice, follow the recommended treatment for vomiting instead of this treatment for diarrhea until your child has gone 8 hours without vomiting.

When should I call my child's healthcare provider?

Call IMMEDIATELY if:

- There are signs of dehydration (no urine in more than 12 hours, very dry mouth, no tears).
- Any blood appears in the diarrhea.
- The diarrhea is severe (more than 8 stools in the last 8 hours).
- The diarrhea is watery AND your child also vomits repeatedly.
- Your child starts acting very sick.

Call during office hours if:

- Mucus or pus appears in the stools.
- A fever lasts more than 3 days.
- Mild diarrhea lasts more than 2 weeks.
- You have other concerns or questions.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.

Written by Barton D. Schmitt, MD, author of "My Child Is Sick," American Academy of Pediatrics Books.

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