

VOMITING AND DIARRHEA IN CHILDREN

Health notes



What causes vomiting and diarrhea in children?

Viruses usually cause vomiting and diarrhea. Most often, vomiting starts first and lasts about 12 to 24 hours. Watery stools or diarrhea often follow, and may last from a few hours to seven to ten days.

Be careful not to confuse vomiting with spitting up in infants. Vomiting is forceful. Spitting up usually happens after a feeding, is unforced, and generally causes no discomfort.

What problems can vomiting and diarrhea cause?

The main risks are dehydration or water loss and weight loss. Children less than one year of age are at greater risk for these problems and need special attention.

How are vomiting and diarrhea treated?

Most infants and children can be treated safely at home. The treatment for both vomiting and diarrhea is basically the same.

Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS)

ORS is the best fluid to give to children to replace lost body fluids and salt. Store brands of ORS include Infalyte[®] and Pedialyte[®] and can be found in your Kaiser Permanente pharmacy, drug store, and some grocery stores.* It is a good idea to always keep a bottle at home in case of unexpected illness.

If your baby is breastfed, continue breastfeeding. If your child is formula fed, give ORS in small amounts very often. Feeding 1 tablespoon every 10 minutes will add up to 3 ounces every hour. Children older than two years can drink 1/2 cup to 1 cup each hour.

By giving ORS slowly, children will keep down most of the solution, even when they continue to vomit. If your child vomits more than three times in one hour, stop using the ORS and call your medical advice nurse (see phone numbers on the back of this page).

Children over one year of age may prefer a flavored type of ORS or like it frozen in a slush. You can add a pinch of NutraSweet[®] to improve the taste of ORS for children over six months of age.*

Do not dilute or mix the ORS with anything unless advised by your doctor or member of health care team. Continue to use ORS for 12 to 24 hours. Check with your advice nurse for further instructions after 24 hours.

You can create a Oral Rehydrating Solution (OSR) for your child by mixing the following products:

- 1/2 teaspoon of salt
- 1/2 teaspoon of baking soda
- 4 tablespoons of sugar
- 1 liter (1.05 quarts) of water

Food and fluids

Children lose a great deal of fluid in each diarrheal stool. They need twice as much fluid as normal when they have diarrhea. Offer these foods when your child will accept them. The best food choice will depend on the child's age.

- Eight ounces of half strength white grape juice and ten saltine crackers. This gives the same balance as ORS and the taste may be preferred.
- Breast milk helps nursing babies fight infection. Continue to breastfeed unless your doctor or member of health care team suggests you to stop.
- Starchy foods, such as rice, cereal, potatoes, noodles, toast, and crackers. Try a rice and water mixture.

- Unsweetened cereals, such as rice cereal, Rice Krispies®, and Cheerios®.
- Yogurt. Most children will take yogurt, except those with severe milk intolerance.
- Bananas and a vegetable, such as carrots.
- Cooked low-fat meats, such as skinless chicken (not fried).

Offer regular fluids and food when your child is ready. Avoid foods or fluids with high amounts of sugar, fat, or fiber. These can make vomiting and diarrhea worse. Popsicles are a good choice of food. They have enough sugar to prevent ketosis (the improper breakdown of fat) and may be tasty enough to tolerate.

Sometimes, children have problems digesting cow's milk products. If it appears that milk and cheese are making your child's illness worse, avoid these foods for a couple of days. A soy-based milk formula may be used in place of regular cow's milk.

Anti-Diarrhea drugs

We do not generally recommend the use of these medications. Check with your doctor or member of health care team before using these products.

When should I call my medical advice nurse or personal physician?

Please call your advice nurse if:

- it is not possible to follow the instructions on this handout,
- the illness lasts for more than three days,
- you suspect food poisoning or another type of poisoning, or
- your child has a history of serious illness.

For more information

Visit kp.org/health

- Read about vomiting and diarrhea in the Health encyclopedia.

Get your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise® Handbook*

- Read about diarrhea and vomiting in the chapter on infant and child health.

Be prepared to answer these questions:

- how long your child has been vomiting,
- how many times your child has vomited and how it looked (color, texture),
- other symptoms, and
- whether your child has been around anyone else with similar symptoms.

Call your medical advice nurse 24 hours a day, 7 days a week at (703) 359-7878 or 1-800-777-7904, or TTY (703) 359-7616 or 1-800-700-4901.

Please call right away if your child shows any of these possible danger signs:

- very tired or sluggish, fussiness, or difficulty waking up
- weakness or dizziness when standing
- rapid breathing
- high fever – 103 degrees F or higher
- cannot keep down fluids
- more than eight to ten large, watery stools per day
- dry mouth, no drools
- sunken-looking eyes or no tears
- decreased amounts of urine – less than three times in twenty-four hours
- severe stomach pain or swollen stomach area
- blood or large amounts of mucous in the stool
- vomiting of blood or green liquid (bile)
- weight loss
- symptoms become more severe or frequent

If you think you are having a medical emergency, call 911. If you are unsure if you are having a medical emergency, call 1-800-677-1112 or TTY 1-800-365-9123.

Call Kaiser Permanente Medical Advice

- Talk to your medical advice nurse 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by calling (703) 359-7878 or 1-800-777-7904 or TTY (703) 359-7616 or 1-800-700-4901.

The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care. If you have persistent medical problems, or if you have further questions, please consult your personal physician or member of your health care team. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse any brand names. Any similar product may be used.