

Caring for the child with Gastroenteritis “Stomach Flu”

Gastroenteritis is a common viral infection in children and usually lasts from three to seven days. Although we call this “stomach flu”, it is not flu and has nothing to do with the influenza which we see every winter and can be prevented with the flu shot. The main danger from gastroenteritis is that children can develop dehydration from the loss of fluid and salts. If dehydration is severe, the child may need to be hospitalized for fluid replacement. You can prevent dehydration fairly easily when your child has gastroenteritis. Here's how:

Give liquids as soon as the symptoms start. The best liquid to give is an oral rehydration solution, such as Pedialyte or Enfalyte. These solutions replace the water and salts lost to vomiting and diarrhea. You can buy them at the grocery store or drug store. You do not need a prescription. Do not give plain water since drinking only water can be harmful. You can give a small amount of water along with the oral rehydration solution if your child wants it. You could also mix the rehydration solution with a small amount of a favorite juice, if you think your child will take that better. A good way to do this is to mix one part favorite juice with three parts Pedialyte and use this as the clear liquid. Give one ounce every half hour until there has been no vomiting for eight hours. Then you can allow your child to take as much as he or she wants, but only clear liquids...no solids at all.

When there has been no vomiting for 24 hours, you can offer some solids. Stay with the BRAT diet (bananas, rice, applesauce, toast) for the next three to four days. Besides those foods, you can offer other low to non fat foods, such as cereals, yogurt, crackers, or fruits. Continue to feed your child, if there is diarrhea without vomiting. Eating is important to maintain health. If your child is nursing, continue to breastfeed. If he is taking formula, continue with the same formula. If he really likes milk, offer non fat milk. Avoid foods with a lot of sugar (such as ice cream, and sweetened cereals) and fried, fatty foods.

Do not give medication without consulting your child's doctor. Most children with gastroenteritis get better without medication. Some over-the-counter medicines for diarrhea can even be harmful. Remember that food and fluids are the most important treatment for this.

Take steps to prevent the spread of infection. Hand washing is the most important means of preventing gastroenteritis from spreading. Wash your hands and exposed arms

with soap and warm water after caring for your child, especially after diaper changes. Keep your fingernails clean and trimmed. Teach your child to wash her hands before eating and, especially, after using the toilet.

Call our office if:

The gastroenteritis is not improving after 48 hours.

The symptoms get worse.

The vomit or diarrhea has blood in it.

Your child is vomiting and cannot keep any fluids down.

Your child has a severe stomachache.

Your child shows any signs of dehydration:

Decreased urination

Sunken eyes

No tears when crying

Extreme thirst

Unusual drowsiness or fussiness

Your child is under 6 months of age.



Alan H Rosen, MD
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