Children’s Services

Diarrhoea and vomiting

What causes diarrhoea & vomiting?
Children may develop diarrhoea and/or vomiting for a variety of reasons. Most of the time it is due to gastroenteritis, which is an infection of the gut, most commonly caused by a virus. Diarrhoea usually lasts for five to seven days and in most children it will stop within two weeks. Vomiting often lasts for one to two days and in most children it will stop within three days. Tummy pains and a mild fever may also occur.

How is it treated?

- Most children with gastroenteritis get better quickly without treatment and can be looked after at home safely. There is no specific treatment for viral gastroenteritis. The most important thing is to ensure that your child is receiving plenty of drinks frequently to replace the fluid they have lost.
- You may give your child a special fluid to drink called oral rehydration salt solution (sometimes called ORS solution or Dioralyte). Oral rehydration salt solution is made up from a powder and is available from pharmacies. It is made up of water, sugar and salts in specific amounts. It helps to replace the water and salts lost from the body because of diarrhoea and vomiting. Your child can drink as much as he/she wants, the more the better. Small, frequent sips/feeds are best.
- Many children vomit a little when they start to drink the oral rehydration salt solution. However, if your child keeps vomiting or will not drink you should contact a healthcare professional. Many children will only take small amounts at a time anyway so it is very important to offer fluids frequently. Fruit juice and fizzy drinks should be discouraged, because these can make diarrhoea worse.

What do I do if my baby is breast-fed?
Continue to breastfeed. Try to increase the length and frequency of feeds. Extra fluid (ORS solution) can be offered to your child between breastfeeds.

What do I do if my baby is formula fed?
Stop formula feeds. Clear fluids (ideally ORS solution) should be given alone for four hours. After that you should continue to give your child’s normal formula. You should not water down their normal bottle.
When should I give food to my child?

Let your child resume a normal diet as soon as he/she allows. Do not worry if your child does not want to eat. Drinks are the most important and food can wait until their appetite returns which may take a few days.

What about dehydration?

The most important complication of diarrhoea and vomiting is dehydration. This is when the body doesn’t have enough water or the right balance of salts to carry out its normal functions. Sometimes children need admitting to hospital for fluid to be given either through a tube passed into the stomach through their nose, or a tube into a vein.

How do I know if my child is dehydrated?

How do they need to see a doctor?

The following are warning signs of dehydration and if you see any of these you should have your child checked by a doctor as soon as possible:

- Pale and mottled skin
- Cold hands and feet
- Dry mouth, tongue and lips or no tears
- Profuse vomiting (unable to keep any fluid down)
- Going more than six hours without passing urine or having less wet nappies
- Sunken eyes or shadows under the eyes
- Sleepy or floppy child
- Being unusually irritable
- Changed breathing, either faster or slower and deeper

Are there any other treatments I can give?

You can give paracetamol to ease fever, headache or stomach pains. Medicine to stop diarrhoea or vomiting is not recommended and can cause more problems. Antibiotics are rarely necessary.

Does my child need any tests?

Tests are not needed in the majority of cases. If diarrhoea persists for more than ten days or has blood in it at any time, a stool sample may be taken. This is sent to the laboratory and investigated for an unusual infection.
What can I do to prevent gastroenteritis from spreading?

- The most important way to prevent the spread of gastroenteritis is washing hands with soap (liquid if possible) in warm running water and careful drying afterwards.
- You and/or your child should wash your hands after going to the toilet, changing nappies, and before touching food.
- Towels used by children with gastroenteritis should not be shared.
- Your child should not go to school or any other childcare facility whilst they have the symptoms, but they can return 48 hours after the last episode of diarrhoea or vomiting.
- Your child should not swim in swimming pools for two weeks after diarrhoea has stopped.

Where can I get more information?

You may want to check this website: www.nice.org.uk/CG84 or contact NHS direct on 0845 4647