

# Vomiting and Diarrhoea

**Vomiting and diarrhoea are often caused by a gastrointestinal (gut) infection. Our bodies can lose a lot of fluid and quickly dehydrate through vomiting and diarrhoea, so it is important to drink or sip fluids regularly while ill. Specially balanced salt and sugar solutions are the best fluid replacement.**

## Main causes

Although gastrointestinal infections are a common cause, vomiting and diarrhoea can be symptoms of a range of medical conditions. Other symptoms that often occur with vomiting and diarrhoea include nausea, poor appetite, abdominal (belly) pain, fever and tiredness.

Causes of vomiting and/or diarrhoea include:

- Viral gut infection – viral gastroenteritis (e.g., rotavirus) is a common cause of vomiting and diarrhoea.
- Bacterial gut infection – bacterial gastroenteritis (e.g., salmonella, campylobacter) can result from contaminated food or water (food poisoning). Symptoms usually start 12-48 hours after eating the food

- Parasite gut infection (e.g., giardia)
- Non-gastrointestinal infections (e.g., ear infection, urinary tract infection, blood poisoning)
- Some medical conditions (e.g., appendicitis, irritable bowel syndrome, inflammatory bowel disease)
- Some medicines (e.g., antibiotics, orlistat, cancer chemotherapy, nonsteroidal antiinflammatory drugs)
- Food intolerance (e.g., lactose)
- Alcohol
- Anxiety.

## Risks

- Dehydration can develop rapidly, especially in the very young and the elderly. Severe dehydration can be fatal.

- Diarrhoea can cause temporary bowel damage, which may interfere with the digestion of the lactose in dairy products. Dairy products should be avoided if they make diarrhoea worse.

## Signs of dehydration

Signs of dehydration include:

- Thirst
- Dark urine
- Little or no urine passed
- Dry mouth, tongue and lips, and no tears
- Skin stays up when pinched
- Sunken eyes, cheeks or abdomen, or shadows under eyes
- Feeling tired, lightheaded, irritable
- Headache
- Muscle cramps
- Changed breathing – either quick, or slow and deep
- Cold, clammy skin
- An irritable, sleepy or ‘floppy’ child
- The ‘soft spot’ on the top of a baby’s head more sunken than usual.

## Treatment of vomiting and diarrhoea

Ask a doctor or pharmacist about the best treatment for you.

### Rehydration

Replacement of water and salts is the most important treatment for vomiting and diarrhoea.

- Begin fluid replacement as soon as vomiting or diarrhoea starts.

- Use specially designed ‘oral rehydration solution’ to replace body salts, glucose and water (e.g., *HYDRALyte*, *Gastrolyte*, *Glucolyte*, *ORS*, *Pedialyte*, *Repalyte*, *Restore*). They are available from pharmacies as solutions, ice blocks and tablets/powder for mixing in water.
- Carefully follow oral rehydration product directions for mixing, storage and use. The balance of water, glucose and body salts in rehydration solutions is important. Use a ready made product if not confident about making the solution yourself.
- Sip or suck small amounts of rehydration solution often, and after vomiting or a runny bowel motion.
- Drink enough fluid to satisfy your thirst and to keep your urine ‘light-coloured’. To replace lost fluid, most people need to drink more than usual.
- Juice, cordial or soft drinks (e.g., lemonade) may be used as fluid replacement if symptoms are very mild. The juice, cordial or soft drink must be diluted with water so that it ‘only just tastes sweet’. Do not use ‘diet’ drinks, ‘sports’ drinks or ‘energy’ drinks.

### Medicines

- Medicines to control diarrhoea (e.g., loperamide) are available for adults from a pharmacist.
- Prescription medicines to relieve nausea and vomiting are available for adults.

## Self care

### Babies

- As breastfeeding protects against infection, continue breastfeeding and offer the breast more often. Offer oral rehydration solution between feeds.
- If baby is bottle fed, give oral rehydration solution at first. Restart normal strength formula or milk when vomiting has eased, and also offer small amounts of oral rehydration solution often.
- It may be necessary to try a lactose free formula. Ask a pharmacist.
- Clean and sterilise babies' bottles, teats and dummies and items used to measure, mix or store liquids.
- Put made-up formula in the fridge without delay.
- Throw away leftover formula or milk.

### Children and adults

- Use oral rehydration solution to replace fluids.
- If necessary, stop solid foods for a short time. Do not hold back solid food from a child for longer than 24 hours.
- After vomiting stops keep sipping fluids and eat if hungry. Gradually reintroduce normal diet, avoiding sweet, fatty and spicy foods.
- Avoid undiluted sugary drinks – they can make diarrhoea worse.
- Stay at home when ill.

## Important

Seek medical advice if the patient:

- Is a baby less than 6 months old or is elderly
- Is pregnant
- Has signs of dehydration
- Is vomiting up all drinks for longer than 12 hours if an adult, or 6 hours if a child
- Has been vomiting for more than 24 hours
- Has had diarrhoea for more than a few days
- Vomits blood, or brown or green bile
- Has bloody or black faeces ( bowel motions)
- Has severe pain in the abdomen or rectum
- Has a high fever (over 38°C)
- Is losing weight
- Has a weakened immune system
- Has an underlying medical condition (e.g., diabetes, epilepsy).

## Preventing 'gastro' infection

Gut infections (infectious gastroenteritis) can be caused by eating infected food, or drinking or using infected water or other fluids. To help protect against infection:

- Wash hands well with soap and water after going to the toilet, changing nappies, gardening or handling animals, and before touching food. If washing facilities are not available, use an alcohol based hand sanitiser
- Use clean surfaces and equipment to prepare and serve food
- Wash hands and equipment immediately after handling raw meats
- Promptly refrigerate food that needs to be kept cold (e.g., meat, milk, cheese)
- Cook food thoroughly, and keep it hot (above 60°C) or refrigerate it without delay.
- Do not drink or swim in contaminated water.

## For more information

### Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: [www.healthinsite.gov.au](http://www.healthinsite.gov.au)

### Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

### National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: [www.nps.org.au](http://www.nps.org.au)

### The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26  
from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts.  
Ask a pharmacist for advice when  
choosing a medicine.*

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