Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

What to Feed a Child Who Has Diarrhea

Diarrhea is a common childhood complaint that doesn't usually pose a health threat in children past infancy.

Children habitually have two or three bowel movements a day and many breastfed infants pass far more. An occasional loose stool is nothing to worry about, but if stools suddenly become far more frequent than normal and are watery or of a different color, your child probably has diarrhea.

Most cases of diarrhea are fairly mild and will soon clear up either on their own or with a little help from you. However, if your infant develops diarrhea, dehydration can be a concern and you should contact your doctor for advice.

Some typical causes of diarrhea include:

- Too much juice or certain fruits may be causing the problem.
- Medication, especially antibiotics, can result in diarrhea. Let your doctor know if this is happening.
- Gastroenteritis is a common infection that inflames the stomach and intestines. Diarrhea is frequently accompanied by vomiting, stomach cramps and a low fever.
- Food poisoning can cause serious diarrhea. Symptoms may also include vomiting, fever and blood in the stool. If you suspect your child has food poisoning, see your doctor immediately.
- Food allergies, particularly to milk, can occasionally cause diarrhea.

Dehydration

Dehydration arises from the loss of fluid and salt from the frequent bowl movements. Severe dehydration may require hospitalization and can be very serious in infants. Help to avoid dehydration in older children by giving clear liquids as soon as the diarrhea starts.

If diarrhea is severe, your doctor may advise giving an oral rehydration solution. You can buy this from your drugstore—ask for an electrolyte solution. You can also make it at home by mixing water with a little infant rice cereal and a dash of salt.

Signs of dehydration include reduced urination, dry mouth, fewer tears, lethargy, irritability, sleepiness, sunken eyes and discolored or wrinkled skin on hands and feet. With prompt medical attention, dehydration can be easily treated.

The Right Fluids and Foods

You can help to prevent diarrhea in your child by ensuring they eat and drink the right amount of foods. Here are some suggestions:

- If the diarrhea is mild, your child can continue to eat normally, although you may wish to replace concentrated fruit juices or other sugary drinks with diluted juices or clear fluids.

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- If diarrhea is moderate to severe, your child may not have much of an appetite. Ensure that plenty of clear fluids are still taken—keep milk to a minimum.
- Small, frequent meals may be better tolerated.
- Remember “BRAT”—this is the traditional food rule for diarrhea and vomiting, and the acronym of highly digestible first foods. BRAT stands for bananas, rice, applesauce and toast.
- Increase soluble fiber, which soaks up water and bulks the stool, helping to slow down the passage of food and reduce watery output.
- Foods high in soluble fiber include bananas, apples, apricots, peaches, melons, strawberries, pearled barley, rice, peas, beans, oat bran and oatmeal.
- Avoid foods with insoluble fiber. These don’t dissolve in water so they make food move faster through your child’s system. Foods high in insoluble fiber include dried fruits, corn, raw vegetables, nuts, seeds, popcorn and raw fruits (except those listed above).
- Reduce or avoid foods high in lactose, such as milk or dairy products.
- Reduce or avoid fatty foods.

Severe Symptoms

If your child exhibits any of the following symptoms, be sure to take him or her to the doctor immediately:

- Your infant develops diarrhea
- Your child has any signs of dehydration
- There is blood in the stool
- There is both diarrhea and constipation
- Your child may have ingested a poisonous substance including household cleaners, plants, berries and wild mushrooms
- Your child has a fever of 103 degrees Fahrenheit or higher
- Your child appears to be very ill

Although diarrhea is not a typically severe condition for children to have, consider the suggestions in this article to keep your children well hydrated and consuming high-fiber foods. If your child begins to exhibit any severe symptoms of diarrhea, be sure to seek medical advice right away.