

DIARRHEA (VIRAL GASTROENTERITIS)

DEFINITION

Diarrhea is a sudden increase in the frequency and looseness of bowel movements. Mild diarrhea is the passage of a few loose or mushy stools. Moderate diarrhea gives many watery stools. The best indicator of the severity of the diarrhea is its frequency. A green stool also points to very rapid passage and moderate to severe diarrhea.

The main complication of diarrhea is dehydration from excessive loss of body fluids. Symptoms are a dry mouth, the absence of tears, a reduction in urine production (e.g., none in hours), and darker, concentrated urine. It is dehydration you need to worry about, not the presence of diarrhea.

Cause

Diarrhea is usually caused by a viral infection of the intestines (gastroenteritis). Occasionally it is caused by bacteria or parasites. Diarrhea can also be due to excessive fruit juice or to a food allergy. If only one or two loose stools are passed, the cause was probably something unusual your child ate.

Expected Course

Diarrhea usually lasts from several days to a week, regardless of the treatment. The main goal of therapy is to prevent dehydration by giving enough oral fluids to keep up with the fluids lost in the diarrhea. Do not expect a quick return to solid stools. Since one loose stool can mean nothing, do not start dietary changes until there have been at least two.

HOME CARE: DIET

Dietary changes are the mainstay of home treatment for diarrhea. The optimal diet depends on your child's age and the severity of the diarrhea. Go directly to the part that pertains to your child.

Special Diets for Diarrhea

Mild Diarrhea *and* Child of Any Age:

- Continue a regular diet with a few simple changes.
- Continue full-strength formula or milk. Encourage an increased intake of these fluids and extra water.
- Reduce the intake of fruit juices. If given, make them half strength with water.
- Avoid raw fruits and vegetables, beans, spicy foods, and any foods that cause loose stools.
- Increase starchy foods.

Bottle-Fed Infants and Frequent, Watery Diarrhea:

Oral Rehydration Solutions (ORS) for 6 to 24 hours. Children with severe diarrhea need ORS to prevent dehydration (i.e., Pedialyte). These over-the-counter products are available in all pharmacies or supermarkets. (ORS is not needed for diarrhea unless it is severe.) Give as much ORS as your baby wants. Diarrhea makes children thirsty, and your job is to satisfy that thirst and prevent dehydration. Never restrict fluids when your child has diarrhea.

Until you get one of these solutions, continue giving your baby full strength formula in unlimited amounts. (Avoid giving your baby Jell-O water mixtures, sports drinks, or rice water. Reason: inadequate sodium content.)

Continue giving your baby ORS for at least 6 hours. Between 6 and 24 hours, switch back to formula when your baby becomes hungry, the diarrhea becomes less watery, and the child is making lots of urine.

Adding Solids (“BRAT” diet). Foods that contain a lot of starch are more easily digested than other foods during diarrhea. If your baby is over 4 months old, has diarrhea for over 24 hours, and wants to eat solid food, give them the following starchy foods until the diarrhea is gone: any cereal, mashed potatoes, applesauce, strained bananas, strained carrots, and other high-fiber foods

Breast-Fed Infants and Frequent, Watery Diarrhea:

Definition of Diarrhea. No matter how it looks, the stool of breast-fed infant must be considered normal unless it contains mucus or blood or develops a bad odor. In fact, breast-fed babies can normally pass some green stools or stools with a water ring around them. Frequency of movements is also not much help. As previously stated, during the first 2 or 3 months of life, the breast-fed baby may normally have as many stools as one after each feeding. The presence of something in the mother’s diet that causes rapid passage should always be considered in these babies (e.g., coffee, cola, or herbal teas). Diarrhea can be diagnosed if your baby’s stools abruptly increase in number. Additional clue are if your baby feeds poorly, acts sick or develops a fever.