



Diarrhoea in babies and children

Advice for parents and guardians from the Health Service Executive (HSE)

Source: www2.hse.ie/conditions/diarrhoea-babies-children/

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Symptoms

Diarrhoea in babies and children

Diarrhoea is poo that is more watery and loose than usual. It can cause poos to happen more often.

There are 2 main types of diarrhoea:

- acute diarrhoea
- chronic diarrhoea

Acute diarrhoea starts suddenly and lasts for less than 2 weeks. It's more common in babies and children.

Chronic diarrhoea lasts more than 2 weeks. It's usually caused by another health condition. It will not go away until the other condition is treated.

Symptoms of acute diarrhoea

Symptoms of acute diarrhoea usually last between 3 and 5 days.

They can include:

- loose or watery poo
- pooing more than 3 times a day
- vomiting or being sick
- [high temperature](#)
- tummy pains
- dehydration

Dehydration

Your child may become dehydrated if they have severe diarrhoea or vomiting.

Contact your GP immediately or go to the nearest hospital if:

- your child shows any signs of severe dehydration

Signs of dehydration are more likely in children who are:

- under 1 year of age
- breastfed and stop feeding
- not drinking fluids
- unwell with other long-term health problems

Symptoms of dehydration include:

- peeing less than normal
- weakness
- less energy than usual
- irritability
- fewer tears when crying
- a dry mouth, lips and tongue
- the soft spot on your baby's head (fontanelle) being sunken

Severe dehydration is more likely if your child has had:

- 6 or more bouts of diarrhoea in 24 hours
- 3 or more bouts of vomiting in 24 hours

When to get medical help

Most babies and toddlers recover from diarrhoea without needing to see a GP.

Contact your GP for advice if your child:

- has had diarrhoea more than 6 times in 24 hours
- has blood or mucus in their poo
- has vomited more than 3 times in 24 hours
- shows any symptoms of dehydration
- still has diarrhoea after 7 days
- has diarrhoea and has recently returned from travelling abroad

Take your child to the emergency department immediately if they:

- have any symptoms of severe dehydration
- have a high temperature that will not go down
- are getting worse fast
- have bad tummy pain

Older children will be able to tell you if they have a bad tummy pain. Younger children and babies will not be able to. If they will not stop crying it could be a sign that they are in pain.

A high temperature for babies under 3 months means 38 degrees Celsius and above. A high temperature for babies over 3 months means 39 degrees Celsius and above.

Treatment

Diarrhoea in babies and children

It is safe to treat your child at home if they do not develop severe diarrhoea or dehydration.

You can reduce your child's symptoms at home by:

- continuing their normal milk feeds
- giving them plenty of small sips of water
- continuing to offer them small amounts of food - do not worry if your child does not want to eat for 1 or 2 days
- feeding them whole milk and fibre, if they are older than 12 months
- giving them [liquid paracetamol](#) to reduce a [high temperature](#) or tummy pains

Important

Always read the label and give the correct dose of liquid paracetamol. Keep all medicines out of your child's reach.

Most children with diarrhoea do not need antibiotics. This is because diarrhoea is usually caused by a virus. Antibiotics cannot treat viruses.

If your child has diarrhoea

If your child has diarrhoea, do not give them:

- fruit juices or fizzy drinks
- medications to stop diarrhoea
- diluted formula

Important

When preparing formula, always follow the packet instructions. It is not safe to dilute formula by adding extra water to it. Make up the bottles as normal and give your baby extra water or drinks in addition to their milk feeds.

Causes

Diarrhoea in babies and children

Diarrhoea is often caused by a stomach bug. Most children with diarrhoea can be cared for at home and will recover in a few days.

Acute diarrhoea

The most common cause of acute diarrhoea is infection.

This can be spread in different ways, such as:

- from other people
- food poisoning
- contaminated water

Infection

Acute diarrhoea is most commonly caused by an infection, which can be passed from person to person.

Infections causing acute diarrhoea are most commonly caused by viruses. For example, the [norovirus \(the winter vomiting bug\)](#) and rotavirus.

All babies born in Ireland after 1 October 2016 are vaccinated against rotavirus.

Diarrhoea can also be caused by bacteria such as:

- [e. coli](#)
- [campylobacter](#)
- [salmonella](#)
- shigella

Parasites like cryptosporidium and giardiasis can also cause diarrhoea.

Food poisoning

Germs in contaminated food can cause diarrhoea.

Types of [food poisoning](#) include:

- salmonella
- campylobacter
- e. coli
- giardiasis

Contaminated water

Drinking water contaminated with germs can make your child ill.

Types of germs include:

- e. coli
- cryptosporidium
- campylobacter

This is more common in countries where there is poor sanitation.

The public water supply in Ireland is treated with chemicals to kill germs. But private wells can become contaminated if they are not protected and treated.

If you think your well water is contaminated, contact the Environmental Protection Agency.

Important

If you think your water might be contaminated, boil it for drinking, cooking, preparing food, preparing formula and brushing your teeth.

Chronic diarrhoea

Chronic diarrhoea is usually not caused by an infection. It's less common than acute diarrhoea and it may be a sign of an underlying health problem, such as:

- [food allergies or food intolerance](#)
- disorders of the small intestine, such as coeliac disease or short bowel syndrome
- inflammation of the bowel (colitis)

Take your child to see a GP, pharmacist or public health nurse if:

- they have diarrhoea that lasts more than 7 to 10 days

Toddler's diarrhoea

Toddler's diarrhoea is a type of chronic diarrhoea that toddlers may get. It's not usually serious. Your child may feel well even if they have diarrhoea.

It is common to find undigested foods like peas and sweetcorn in a toddler's diarrhoea.

If you think your child has toddler's diarrhoea, make sure they are drinking enough fluids. Bring your child to a GP, who can make sure they are growing well.

Other tips that might help include:

- not offering your toddler any fruit juices or squashes to drink
- making sure they have a good amount of fats in their diet, like whole milk or yogurt
- making sure they eat a [healthy balanced diet](#) with fruit and vegetables

Prevention

Diarrhoea in babies and children

The best way to prevent diarrhoea is to wash and dry your hands well. Always use soap and warm water. Use hand sanitiser if there is no running water available.

[Breastfeeding your baby](#) can reduce their risk of diarrhoea.

When travelling abroad, try to avoid:

- drinking tap water
- drinks containing ice
- food prepared in water, such as salads washed in tap water

Make sure your child's [vaccines are up to date](#).

Stop diarrhoea spreading

Many of the germs that cause diarrhoea can spread easily from person to person. There are many things you can do to stop the spread of diarrhoea.

Important

Your child should stay home from school, creche, or childcare until at least 48 hours have passed since their last episode of diarrhoea and vomiting.

Wash and dry hands properly

You and your child should [wash your hands thoroughly](#) with soap and warm water.

Always wash your hands in the following situations:

- after changing a nappy
- after helping children use the toilet
- after cleaning or touching a potty
- before preparing, handling or eating food
- after handling rubbish bins and dirty nappies
- after handling raw meat
- after handling animals or animal waste

Always dry your hands properly after washing them.

Keep the bathroom clean

It's important to clean the bathroom if a member of the household has diarrhoea.

Use hot water, disinfectant and disposable cloths to clean the:

- toilet
- sink
- bathroom surfaces
- door handles
- toilet seat
- flush handle

Always wash and dry your hands properly when you're finished.

Wash soiled surfaces

Do the following if furniture or floors become soiled with poo or vomit:

- soak up excess liquid with paper towels
- thoroughly wash the surface with detergent and water
- rinse the area with clean water
- allow the area to dry
- throw away or thoroughly wash any gloves and equipment used
- wash and dry your hands

If bedding or clothing becomes soiled with poo or vomit, remove what you can into the toilet. Then wash the items in a separate wash at a high temperature.

Other ways to stop the spread of diarrhoea

Keep your child home from school, creche or childcare until at least 48 hours have passed since their last episode of diarrhoea and vomiting.

The following tips can help to reduce the spread of diarrhoea:

Don't

- × do not let sick people prepare food
- × do not let your sick child share towels with others