

Diarrhoea & Vomiting

What causes acute diarrhoea?

- Infections are the commonest cause. These are often viruses such as norovirus or rotavirus. Acute diarrhoea can also be caused by bacteria such as E.coli or campylobacter.
- Too much alcohol.
- Side effects of some drugs such as antibiotics. This is thought to be due to them killing the normal bacteria of the gut.
- Anxiety.

Common symptoms of diarrhoea

- Diarrhoea which can be watery and may occasionally contain blood. (Make an appt to see one of the GPs if there is blood in your diarrhoea).
- Nausea and vomiting. (Make an appt to see one of the GP's if there is blood in the vomit).
- Abdominal cramping, bloating or pain. This usually eases after each episode of diarrhoea.
- Fever.
- Headache.
- Loss of appetite.

Preventing the spread of diarrhoea

Many of the bacteria which cause diarrhoea are passed on by infected food products. Proper storage, preparation and cooking of food as well as good hygiene therefore help to prevent infectious diarrhoea. Always wash your hands.

- After you go to the toilet.
- Before you touch food.
- Between handling raw meat and food ready to be eaten. (There may be some bacteria on raw meat).
- After gardening.
- After playing with pets. (Healthy animals carry certain harmful bacteria).

If you have diarrhoea you should:

- Regularly clean the toilets that you use. Wipe the flush handle and toilet seat with disinfectant each time you use the toilet.
- Wash your hands thoroughly after going to the toilet. Don't share towels or flannels.
- Do not prepare food for others.
- Stay off work or school until symptoms go. If you work with food you should stay off work until you have had no diarrhoea or vomiting for 48 hours. Many schools also require pupils to have been free of diarrhoea or vomiting for 48 hours before they can go back.

Treatment

Most cases of diarrhoea or vomiting can be treated at home and you will not need to see a GP.

Symptoms often settle within a few days and most people will be clear within a week as the immune system usually clears the infection.

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Fluid

- The aim is to prevent dehydration (low body fluid). As a rough guide, drink at least 200mls of fluid after each bout of diarrhoea or vomiting.
- This extra fluid is in addition to your usual drinks.
- If you vomit, wait 5-10 minutes and then start drinking again, but more slowly. Try taking a few sips every 2-3 minutes but make sure you get through the amount suggested above.
- If you have mild diarrhoea or vomiting then your usual drinks ie water or diluted fruit juice will be fine. Sugary drinks such as pop or undiluted fruit juice should be avoided. Diluted fruit juice ice lollies can be a useful way to give fluid to children if they do not want to drink.
- Rehydration drinks are the ideal drinks to have if your diarrhoea or vomiting are more severe and can be bought from pharmacies (e.g. Dioralyte). They provide the right balance of water, salts and sugar. The small amount of sugar and salt helps the water to be absorbed better from the gut. They do not stop or reduce the diarrhoea. They prevent or treat dehydration. Do not try to make your own rehydration drinks as the quantities of sugar and salt must be right.

Food

- Eat as normally as possible. People used to be advised to stop eating for 48 hours but this is no longer thought to be necessary.
- However, you may not feel like food and for most adults and children a couple of days without food will not be a problem as long as they keep drinking plenty of fluids.
- Some people find high carbohydrate food like rice or toast easier to take until they feel able to go back to a normal diet.
- Some information suggests that children with diarrhoea and vomiting should not be given dairy products as a child's intestines do not handle the sugars (lactose) in dairy products very well.

Medicines

- Anti-diarrhoea drugs are not usually necessary. However, you may wish to reduce the number of trips to the toilet. You can buy anti-diarrhoea drugs from pharmacies. The commonest one of these is loperamide (Imodium). Do not give anti-diarrhoea drugs to children under 12.
- If you are in pain, take the painkiller that you would normally take for a headache following the usual instructions.
- Most cases of gastroenteritis are caused by viruses and so cannot be treated with antibiotics.
- Anti-sickness medicine (anti-emetics) may occasionally be given in severe vomiting but many of these medicines can make you drowsy so it is not advisable to drive or use machinery after taking them.

Probiotics

- Some research suggests that taking probiotics may reduce the duration of the diarrhoea by about one day.
- Probiotics are dietary supplements of 'good, non harmful bacteria or yeasts'. The idea is that the 'good' bacteria and yeasts multiply in the gut and protect the gut from the 'bad' infecting bacteria or virus.
- Probiotics are not available on the NHS but can be bought in supermarkets as capsules or yoghurt products.

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Complications of diarrhoea?

These are uncommon in the UK and the main one is dehydration. If you drink plenty of fluid this is unlikely to happen or will be mild and you will recover as you drink. Dehydration tends to be more common in elderly or frail people. Signs of dehydration are:

- Passing little urine. This would be no wet nappies or trips to the toilet for 10 hours.
- A dry mouth or tongue.
- Sunken eyes.
- Weakness.
- Drowsiness.
- Cool hands or feet.

See one of the GPs if you notice any of the following

- Signs that you are becoming dehydrated.
- Blood in diarrhoea or vomit.
- Vomiting more than 2 days in children (? Adults) and diarrhoea that does not settle after 7 days in adults or 5 days in children.
- Pains that are getting worse.
- Drowsiness or confusion.
- You can't keep down medicines that you usually take regularly.
- You have recently travelled abroad.

Based on information taken from Patient UK, BUPA and NHS Direct.

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