Diarrhoea and vomiting in children (gastroenteritis) Information for parents and carers

Emergency Department
Does my child need to see a doctor?
Most children with gastroenteritis get better quickly without treatment. You will normally be able to look after your child safely at home.

About dehydration
Severe diarrhoea and vomiting can lead to dehydration, which is when the body doesn’t have enough water or the right balance of salts to carry out its normal functions. If the dehydration becomes severe it can be dangerous.

Children at risk of dehydration include:
- young babies
- children who haven’t been able to drink enough during their illness
- children whose diarrhoea and vomiting has been severe.

Some of the symptoms of dehydration are:
- seeming unwell
- pale or mottled skin
- being unusually irritable or lethargic
- cold hands and feet
- passing less urine than normal.

How to prevent dehydration
- Keep feeding your child as normal, including breastfeeding and other milk feeds.
- Offer plenty of drinks.
- Avoid fruit juice and fizzy drinks – these can make diarrhoea worse.
- Your healthcare professional may recommend that you give your child oral rehydration salts. These can help prevent dehydration from occurring and it is also used to treat children who have become dehydrated.

Care at home – treating dehydration
- Most children who are dehydrated can be rehydrated by giving them rehydration salts to drink.
- Make up the rehydration salts according to the instructions on the packet.
- Give your child frequent, small drinks of rehydration salts, according to the instructions.
- Your child may vomit a little when they start to drink the rehydration salts.
• If you are breastfeeding your child, continue to breastfeed in addition to giving the rehydration salts.

• If you are not breastfeeding your child, try not to give your child any other drinks unless your healthcare professional tells you it is ok to do so.

• Your child should not eat solid food until they are rehydrated.

• It usually takes about four hours to complete rehydration.

Caring for your child after rehydration
• It is important your child eats well after they are rehydrated, to help with recovery.

• Your child can start to eat solid food straight away.

• Your child should drink plenty of their usual fluids (including, for example, breast milk or other milk feeds).

• You should avoid giving your child fruit juice or fizzy drinks until the diarrhoea has stopped.

• Your healthcare professional may also recommend that your child drinks rehydration solution after each large watery stool.

Preventing the spread of gastroenteritis
• Hand washing is the best way to help stop other people getting gastroenteritis. You and/or your child should wash your hands with soap (liquid if possible) in warm running water and then dry them carefully:
  – after going to the toilet
  – after changing nappies
  – before touching food or eating.

• Your child should not:
  – share his or her towels with anyone
  – go to school or any other childcare facility until 48 hours after the last episode of diarrhoea or vomiting
  – swim in swimming pools until two weeks after the diarrhoea has stopped.
Care at home
Diarrhoea often lasts for five to seven days and in most children it will stop within two weeks. Vomiting often lasts for one to two days and in most children it will stop within three days.

Call your GP
If your child’s symptoms are taking longer to get better.
If your child will not drink the rehydration salts and/or keeps being sick.

Contact details
Switchboard: 020 3456 7890
Extension: 70083
Emergency Department
University College Hospital
Ground Floor, 235 Euston Road
London NW1 2BU
www.uclh.nhs.uk

Where can I get more information?
Call 111 when you need medical help fast, but it’s not an emergency.
Or visit:
www.nhs.uk/symptomcheckers

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