

Doc Talk

By Dr. Veronica Naudin



How to Treat a Viral Illness

Q: Some of the children in my son's playgroup have come down with a viral illness, which is causing them to have vomiting and diarrhea. What do I do if my son catches this virus?

A: It seems this winter has been a very big year for vomiting and diarrhea. It truly has affected many people, both young and old. One of the interesting aspects of acute gastroenteritis is that it may cause a range of severity of symptoms in different people.

How does it start? While some children will start with symptoms of loose stools turning into diarrhea, the majority of children will have vomiting for several hours, followed by diarrhea. The vomiting can be very frequent, sometimes every hour. When the vomiting reflex continues but your child has no more food or digestive enzyme to vomit, they will have dry heaves.

How do I know it is simply a virus? If your child has both vomiting and diarrhea, the most likely etiology is a viral illness. Vomiting alone could indicate other diagnosis such as acute appendicitis, food poisoning, and other causes. Diarrhea alone especially if the diarrhea has specks of blood and/or mucous in the stool could indicate a bacterial cause for your child's symptoms. A stool culture is required to make a conclusive diagnosis and initiate appropriate therapy. If you have questions about your child's illness, you should contact your pediatrician.

How do I treat it if it is a virus? The treatment for acute gastroenteritis is supportive. You must keep up with your child's fluid loss. Most importantly, you must stop the vomiting cycle. Initially, you must stop all dairy products including milk. The exception to this may be breast milk, which is sometimes tolerated by young infants. Although your child will be thirsty, you should avoid the temptation of giving your child a large cup of liquid. Children cannot tolerate more than 3-4 ounces and will resume vomiting. Hence, you should begin with merely one ounce of fluid each hour. As your child tolerates the input and does not vomit you can liberalize his/her input. The best liquid is liquid electrolyte solution such as

Pedialyte. Children older than 2 years old do not like the taste of liquid Pedialyte but will take the Pedialyte in its frozen state (ie. popsicle) without difficulty. Once your child is taking fluids for several hours and is not vomiting, you can begin solid foods. Foods that are easily tolerated when you have a viral gastroenteritis include bananas, applesauce, rice and toast. After he/she is doing well with these items, you can begin pasta, lean chicken, and soups. After a few days, your child will be back to normal. All children lose some weight with these illnesses but they quickly regain their weight within a week after their symptoms resolve.

What do I do if my child continues to vomit?

The reason that it is important to stop the vomiting is that your child may become dehydrated. Signs that your child is dehydrated are decreased or absence of urine output, very dry mouth, absence of tears and extreme lethargy. If you believe your child is becoming dehydrated, you must call your child's physician immediately. Young children and infants are at greatest risk of becoming dehydrated because they are small.

Is it contagious? Most of these viral illnesses are passed to other people via their hands. Hence, it is very important to wash your hands diligently. This is especially true after you change your child's diaper.

Hopefully, your child will not become ill. However, you should feel free to consult your pediatrician with any aspect of your child's illness.

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