

GUIDE FOR PARENTS

WHAT TO DO ABOUT VOMITING

By Barton D. Schmitt, MD

Vomiting is the forceful ejection of a large portion of the stomach's contents through the mouth. Nausea and abdominal discomfort usually precede each bout of vomiting. Vomiting occurs when strong stomach contractions push against a closed stomach outlet. By contrast, regurgitation is the effortless spitting up of one or two mouthfuls of stomach contents that are commonly seen in babies less than 1 year of age.

Most vomiting is caused by a viral infection of the stomach or by your child's eating something that irritates the stomach lining. The viral type is often associated with diarrhea. Vomiting usually stops in 12 to 24 hours. Temporarily changing your child's diet generally speeds recovery.

Home Care

Give your child clear fluids, but no solids, for eight hours. Offer your child clear fluids (no milk) in small amounts until he or she has gone for eight hours without vomiting. For vomiting without diarrhea, the best fluid usually is water or ice chips because some water is absorbed directly across the stomach wall. For older children, one-half strength soft drink, such as lemon-lime, or Kool-Aid is acceptable. Stir until no fizz remains because the bubbles can inflate the stomach and increase the chances of continued vomiting.

Start with one tablespoon for children between 1 and 6 years of age and one ounce for school-age children, every ten minutes. After four hours without vomiting, double the amount each hour. If your child vomits using this treatment, rest the stomach completely for one hour and then start over but with smaller amounts. The one-swallow-at-a-time approach rarely fails.

Give bland foods after eight hours without vomiting. After your child has gone for eight hours without vomiting, he or she can gradually return to a normal diet. For older children start with foods such as saltine crackers, honey on white bread, bland soups (such as chicken with rice or noodles), rice, and mashed potatoes. Your child usually can be back on a normal diet within 24 hours after he or she stops vomiting. It won't hurt him or her not to eat much for a few days as long as he or she drinks some water.

For bottle-fed infants (under 1 year of age), offer an oral electrolyte solution such as Infalyte or Pedialyte for eight hours. If your child has vomited only once, offer one-half-strength formula. If he or she vomits two or more times, offer Infalyte or Pedialyte in small amounts (one teaspoon) every ten minutes. After four hours without vomiting, increase the amount. After eight hours of not vomiting, return to formula. Infants over 4 months can also return to eating cereal and strained bananas after eight hours and go back to a normal diet in 24 to 48 hours after vomiting stops.

For breastfed babies, reduce the amount per feeding. The key to treating vomiting in breastfed babies is to provide breast milk in smaller amounts than usual. If your baby has vomited twice, continue breastfeeding but nurse only on one side each time for 10 minutes. After your baby has gone for eight hours without vomiting, return to nursing on both sides.

If your baby vomits three or more times, nurse him or her for four or five minutes every 30 to 60 minutes. If vomiting continues, put him on water or an oral electrolyte solution. As soon as four hours have passed without vomiting, return to nursing, but again giving smaller-than usual amounts of breast milk for eight hours.

Discontinue all nonessential medicines for eight hours. Oral medicines can irritate the stomach and make vomiting worse. If your child has a fever over 104 °F (40°C) rectally, use acetaminophen suppositories, which are available without a prescription. Lower fevers don't require treatment. Call our office if your child needs to be taking a prescription medicine, such as an antibiotic.

Avoid these common mistakes. A common mistake is to give as much clear fluid as the child wants rather than gradually increasing the amount. This almost always leads to continued vomiting. Another mistake is to force the child to drink when he or she doesn't want anything.

Keep in mind that there is no effective drug for vomiting caused by a virus or irritated stomach lining and that diet therapy is the answer. Vomiting alone rarely causes dehydration unless you give drugs by mouth, milk, or too much clear fluid at a time.

Call our office immediately if:

- Your child is under one month old and vomits more than once.
 - Your child develops diarrhea and vomits clear fluids three or more times.
 - Your child does not urinate in more than eight hours.
 - Your child's crying produces no tears.
 - Blood appears in the vomited material and it's not from a recent nosebleed.
 - Abdominal pain develops and lasts for more than four hours.
 - Your child becomes difficult to awaken or confused.
 - You suspect poisoning from a plant, bad food, medicine, or other chemical.
 - Your child starts acting very sick.
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Call during regular office hours if:

- Your child has been vomiting for more than 12 hours if he or she is under 6 months old, more than 24 hours if he or she is between 6 months and 2 years old, or more than 48 hours if he or she is over 2 years old.
 - Vomiting is a regular problem for your child.
 - You have other concerns or questions.
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