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Gastroenteritis

Gastroenteritis is an infection in the bowel which causes diarrhoea and sometimes vomiting. This infection can be caused by many different germs or bugs but the most common cause is a viral or bacterial infection. Most of the time your child will not need antibiotics. Gastroenteritis is very contagious and often will affect many children within a childcare centre or school class. Gastroenteritis can make babies and infants very unwell as they can become dry (dehydrated) very quickly. Children with gastroenteritis can feel quite unwell and not want to eat or drink. They can also have vomiting which also increases the risk of them becoming significantly dehydrated. Some children may also complain of tummy pain or cramping and have a fever. The symptoms can last for up to 10 days.

Assessment and management at home and in hospital

It is important that all children under 18 months of age with diarrhea are reviewed by a doctor usually your family doctor or by an emergency department doctor if they are becoming very unwell. Signs that your infant or toddler is becoming unwell include excessive drowsiness (not waking for feeds), being floppy or lethargic, dry lips and mouth, not passing wee for more than 6-8 hours and cold hands or feet. If you see any blood in the poos these children need a medical review. If you are worried it is always best to get a doctor review.

If your child is still taking fluids and does not show any of these symptoms they can probably be managed at home. The main aim of treatment is to give small amounts of fluid frequently. If you are breastfeeding, continue to do this but feed more often. You can give an oral rehydration solution (eg Gastrolyte, Hydralyte) as well. If bottle feeding, give oral rehydration solution or clear fluids for the first 12 hours, then give normal formula in small, but more frequent amounts particularly after a vomit. Do not give sports drinks, Lucozade, or undiluted lemonade, cordials, or fruit juices.

Even if your child is still having diarrhea and vomiting if they are still taking oral fluids and having a reasonable number of wees (at least 4 in 24 hours) they will cope with the infection. It is not advisable to give medicines to infants and children to stop diarrhea and vomiting as these symptoms are often the way that the body tries to clear the infection. Always make sure that you wash your hands before and after caring for a child with gastroenteritis as this condition is very contagious and is

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carried on the skin and in the poos. Try to keep your child away from other children and babies during this time until the diarrhea stops. Your child may not be interested in eating much for a few days this is not dangerous unless they are refusing fluids. If they are hungry it is alright to feed them.

If your child is showing signs of becoming more unwell and you take them to an emergency department to be assessed they may need admission for a few hours or a couple of days. Blood tests or poo tests are usually not ordered unless a child is very unwell. They may need fluid through a very small tube through the nose that leads directly to the stomach (a nasogastric tube) or directly into a vein through a small plastic tube in the skin. Almost all children will make a complete recovery from gastroenteritis.