

Vomiting and Diarrhea

Loose and frequent stools are almost always caused by a virus (called gastroenteritis, or "stomach flu"), and may or may not be accompanied by vomiting and fever. Occasionally, diarrhea is caused by parasites or bacteria, as in food poisoning caused by tainted shellfish, chicken, eggs or beef. The main danger from vomiting and/or diarrhea is dehydration - so the key to successful treatment is to drink enough fluids.

Vomiting in the absence of diarrhea is a more concerning symptom. It can be caused by a blockage in the intestines, irritation of the pancreas, gallbladder disease, a serious infection in the blood, a severe headache, or many other conditions. Vomiting with diarrhea is usually due to gastroenteritis.

In the first 6 hours: Try sipping small amounts of clear liquids (Gatorade, flat gingerale, Kool-Aid, juices, water) every few minutes. Don't try to drink too much at one time. Even if you vomit, your stomach is only about 70% effective in emptying itself with vomiting - so, if you can continue to sip fluids, some will stay down.

In the next 12 hours: Try some simple foods, like rice products, toast with a little jam, bananas, apple sauce, and clear soups. It is probably best to avoid lactose for a few days - so try to avoid milk and cheese. Yogurt is OK, and will help especially with antibiotic-associated diarrhea (diarrhea that starts after you have been taking an antibiotic). It is also a good idea to avoid caffeine and alcohol until the diarrhea disappears.

Over the next couple of days, gradually advance your diet to include pasta, potatoes, chicken, fish, fruits and vegetables.

Vomiting usually stops within 6-12 hours after the onset of the illness. If the vomiting persists for more than a day or so, I would be very concerned that you might have a more serious illness. Diarrhea, on the other hand, tends to last for 3-5 days. After 5-7 days of diarrhea, I would suggest checking for bacteria or parasites (we can give you the containers in which to collect the stool specimens). If you have bloody diarrhea, I would suggest checking for bacteria sooner, since bacterial dysentery is characterized by bloody diarrhea, often with a fever.

Generally, gastroenteritis is no more than a nuisance illness - it makes you feel crummy for a day or two, but is not very dangerous. If you have a particularly severe illness, or you have other medical problems that make you more susceptible to dehydration (like kidney disease, diabetes mellitus, or congestive heart failure), you may need to be hospitalized for IV fluids. The warning signs of dehydration include:

- inside of the mouth becomes very dry
- poor urine output (urinating less than 2-3 times per day).
- rapid weight loss
- feeling very washed out and dizzy

Other reasons to call me include:

- fever over about 100 to 100.5
- blood in the stools
- worsening abdominal pain

In general, I do not suggest using medication for diarrhea. Pepto-Bismol is fairly safe if you feel strongly that you want to try something. Kaopectate is only marginally effective, in my opinion. Imodium is quite effective, but I would not use it if you have a fever or any blood in the stools. Vomiting should not generally be treated with medication, unless you have been evaluated by a doctor, and he/she recommends something.

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