

Resource Article

Diarrhea and Dehydration

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What Is Diarrhea?

Diarrhea is passing of 3 or more loose or watery feces per day. Diarrhea is usually the result of an infection of the intestinal tract or gut by germs such as bacteria, viruses, or parasites. The infection is caused by contaminated food or water. It is spread from person to person through poor hygiene. For example, a person who does not wash his hands after using the toilet can spread diarrhea.

Why Is Diarrhea Dangerous?

Diarrhea with dehydration is the second-leading cause of death in children under age 6. Diarrhea kills about 1.5 million children every year. Diarrhea can lead to poor weight gain in children. Though diarrhea is not as deadly for older children, teens, and adults, it can still lead to dehydration, which is the loss of fluid and salts from the body. Dehydration causes poor health and can even lead to death.

However, there is good news! Diarrhea and dehydration can be prevented and treated.

How to Prevent Diarrhea

Drink only safe water. Safe drinking water has been boiled, filtered, or treated so that it is clean and free of germs. (For the first 6 months of life, babies should feed only on breast milk.)

Practice good hygiene. Wash your hands before cooking, before eating, and after going to the toilet.

Prepare food in a clean area using clean pots and dishes.

Some areas have a vaccine for 1 cause of diarrhea (rotavirus).

Helping a Child or Teen with Diarrhea

There are several danger signs that a child or teen with diarrhea needs medical attention.

- Is the child or teen unusually sleepy or not able to respond to you?
- Is the child or teen unable to eat or drink anything?
- Has the child or teen had a seizure or fit?
- Does the child or teen vomit everything?
- Is there blood in the feces? Diarrhea with blood in the feces is called dysentery. A child or teen with dysentery needs treatment with antibiotics.
- Has the diarrhea lasted for 2 weeks or more? Children and teens with diarrhea that lasts more than 2 weeks risk not getting the nutrition their bodies need from their food.
- Does the child or teen look poorly nourished?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, the child or teen should receive immediate medical care at a clinic or hospital. If the child or teen is able to drink, begin giving fluids such as an oral rehydration solution immediately. Give the child or teen as many fluids as he will drink, and continue feeding the him while you are waiting for medical care.

Guidelines for Treating Diarrhea

Children and teens who are sick with diarrhea but who have no danger signs may be treated at home.

Give extra fluids, including an oral rehydration solution (ORS) whenever possible. Mix 1 packet of powder with 1 liter of clean water. Give as much as the child or teen will drink. ORS helps to replace the fluid that the child or teen has lost with diarrhea and helps him to recover more quickly. Give the child or teen clean water. Give the child or teen foods that contain water, such as soup. Mothers with young infants should continue breast-feeding and should breast-feed more frequently than usual.

Continue feeding. Give the child or teen foods that are high in nutrition. This helps prevent weight loss and malnutrition.

Never give a child or teen drugs to stop vomiting and diarrhea. Those medicines can be dangerous, especially for young children.

Give zinc. Zinc makes the child or teen stronger and helps her to recover more quickly from diarrhea. For a child from 6 months to 5 years of age, give 1 tablet of zinc per day for 10 days.

Watch for signs that the child or teen needs more care. Return for medical care if he becomes sicker, cannot eat or drink, or has blood in the feces.