

# GASTROENTERITIS IN CHILDREN

Gastroenteritis is an infection of the gut. It causes diarrhoea, and may also cause vomiting, tummy pain and fever. In most cases the infection clears over several days, but sometimes takes longer. The main risk is dehydration. The main treatment is to give the child lots to drink, often this is with special rehydration drinks. Also, to encourage the child to eat as normally as possible. See a doctor if you suspect that a child is dehydrating, or if they have any worrying symptoms which are listed below.

## What is gastroenteritis and what causes it?

Gastroenteritis is an infection of the guts (intestines). The severity can range from a mild tummy upset for a day or two with some mild diarrhoea, to severe diarrhoea and vomiting for several days or longer. Many viruses, bacteria, and other microbes (germs) can cause gastroenteritis.

- ◆ A virus is a common cause in the UK. Sometimes it is just 'one of those germs going about'. Viruses are easily spread from one person to another by close contact, or when an infected person prepares food for others. Infection with a virus called rotavirus is the most common cause of gastroenteritis in children in the UK. Almost every child in the UK will have a rotavirus infection before they are five years old.
- ◆ Food poisoning (infected food) causes some cases of gastroenteritis. Many different types of germs can cause food poisoning. Common examples are bacteria called campylobacter and salmonella.
- ◆ Water contaminated by bacteria or other germs is a common cause of gastroenteritis, particularly in countries with poor sanitation.

## What are the symptoms?

- ◆ The main symptom is diarrhoea, often with vomiting as well.
- ◆ Crampy pains in the abdomen (tummy) are common. Pains may ease for a while each time some diarrhoea is passed.
- ◆ High temperatures (fever) and headaches are common.

If vomiting occurs, it usually lasts only a day or so. Diarrhoea often lasts for several days or more and often continues after the vomiting stops. Loose stools (loose faeces) can persist for a week or so before a normal pattern returns. Sometimes the symptoms last longer.

## What action should you take ?

See a doctor if you are at all concerned about your child or if any of the following develop:

- ◆ Blood in the diarrhoea.
- ◆ Vomiting or diarrhoea that does not start to settle after 2-3 days.
- ◆ Pains that are getting worse.
- ◆ Drowsiness or confusion.

## How can you prevent gastroenteritis?

Proper storage, preparation and cooking of food, and good hygiene helps to prevent gastroenteritis. In particular, always wash your hands, and teach children to wash theirs:

- ◆ After going to the toilet (and after changing nappies).
- ◆ Before touching food. And also, between handling raw meat and food ready to be eaten. (There may be some bacteria on raw meat).
- ◆ After gardening.
- ◆ After playing with pets (healthy animals can carry certain harmful bacteria).

If a child or anyone in your household has gastroenteritis, the following are also recommended until symptoms go.

- ◆ Regularly clean the toilets they use. Also, wipe the flush handle and toilet seat with disinfectant (such as household bleach) after each time they use the toilet.
- ◆ Make sure they wash their hands after going to the toilet. Don't share towels and flannels.
- ◆ Do not let them help to prepare food for others.
- ◆ They should stay off school, nursery, etc, until free of diarrhoea and vomiting for 48 hours.