

Vomiting and Diarrhea (Gastroenteritis)

The “stomach flu.” Most people at some point in their life experience gastroenteritis, an illness that leads to symptoms of vomiting and diarrhea. Children are no exception, and it is often difficult to watch your child suffer during these times. Many parents are rightfully concerned when they see their children uncomfortable and wonder how best to treat them. What is gastroenteritis? How can we as parents treat our children’s symptoms at home? When should we bring them to Coastal Pediatrics for evaluation?

What is Gastroenteritis?

Kids usually experience several episodes of vomiting and diarrhea during their childhood. This illness is usually caused by one of several different viruses and is rarely due to a bacterial infection. During the illness, the linings of the stomach and intestines become irritated. During the first day of the illness, a child often will begin vomiting. Watery diarrhea usually starts 1-2 days later. During these first few days low grade fevers (100-102 degrees) may also occur. A child typically will stop vomiting after 2-3 days, but the diarrhea may persist for 7-10 days.

How should you treat the infection?

It is important to realize that since gastroenteritis is normally caused by a virus, antibiotics (medicine to treat bacterial infections) will not work for these infections.

So what should you do to treat your child? The biggest concern is dehydration. It is important to continue to offer your child liquids. His/her appetite will usually decrease; this is normal and ok, even if he/she does not eat any food during the first several days. The following is a general treatment guideline of “do’s and don’ts” for your child:

- The best liquids to give are rehydration solutions like Pedialyte. Try to avoid giving too much soda or juice. Water by itself is not recommended as it does not replace the salts that your child’s body has lost. If your child will not take Pedialyte, an acceptable alternative is Gatorade (or try mixing the Pedialyte with Gatorade). The ideal liquid for infants (under 1 year of age) is breast milk or formula, however Pedialyte should be used if the infant cannot keep breast milk or formula down.
- Frequent, small amounts of liquids are ideal. Too much liquid at once can irritate the stomach and cause vomiting. Try giving 1-2 sips every 10-15 minutes.
- You may use acetaminofen (Tylenol) for any fevers. Try to avoid ibuprofen (Motrin/Advil) as this can cause stomach irritation.
- Allow your older child to eat solid food once he/she is hungry, but try to avoid spicy foods and milk products.

- In general anti-diarrheal medicines (Pepto-bismol, Immodium) are not recommended.

When should you call our office?

- Increasing signs of dehydration (no tears, dry mouth, decreased urination, sunken eyes)
- Lethargy (child is difficult to arouse)
- Bloody diarrhea
- Persistent vomiting and unable to take fluids
- Diarrhea for longer than 2 weeks
- Severe stomach pain
- Vomiting for several days without diarrhea

Of course, while these guidelines provide information to help you care for your child, no general overview can address the needs of each specific person. Please feel free to call our office with any questions or concerns, and we will be happy to discuss your child's course of treatment over the phone, or recommend an office visit if necessary.

Ben Pecht, M.D.