

ACUTE GASTROENTERITIS

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What's gastroenteritis?

It is a diarrhoeac illness (liquid faeces) whose beginning is generally sudden and can be accompanied by other symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, temperature and abdominal pain. It is an acute process that gets spontaneously cured within a few days, that is the reason why it is called acute gastroenteritis. Its duration can vary, especially in infants it can last one or two weeks.

Its cause is infectious, mainly produced by viruses and rarely by bacteria. Gastroenteritis is a common condition in infants although in the Western world, it is not usually serious.

Treatment

Its treatment is based on three main facts:

- **Keep your infant hydrated**, give them water frequently and let them drink what they want, small quantities of liquid help to prevent vomits. In serious cases, specially in children, water is not enough and so a pharmaceutical rehydrating solution will be needed.

- **Avoid using other medicines** but antitermic compounds or other medicines recommended by a doctor. Non-recommended antibiotics can extend diarrhoea as well as the infection transmission period to other people, even in most of gastroenteritis caused by bacteria. Medicines to combat vomiting help to improve this symptom but they do not cure and can have secondary effects.

- **Provide food at once**, there is no need to force the infant and there should be no stop period. Babies do not need to change their diet: Those who are breast-fed must keep on doing this, for those who use a feeding bottle it is not necessary to reduce the concentration of the adapted formula adding more water, those who already eat baby food can have all kinds of cereals, vegetables, meat, fish, dairy products (milk as well as yoghurt) and fruits (without adding any sugar). Children and adults must avoid sugar and

food which contains a large amount of fat.

If early feeding improves the cure of gastroenteritis, the initial impression can be just the opposite because it provokes defecation as soon as food is eaten. This must not worry you, since this is just the consequence of an instestinal reflex. Keep in mind, as well as in other situations, that if children do not want to eat, do not force them to do so.

How to prevent gastroenteritis

Gastroenteritis, as an infectious illness, can be transmitted among people. The most usual source of spread of this illness is the contact with a child's faeces or nappies. The way to avoid it is to increase the hygiene conditions of the child and of the nanny, above all in hands washing. Cleaning must be thorough after handling a nappy, cleaning the child, after going to the toilet and, of course, before meals.

From recent times, an oral vaccine against one of the viruses which causes gastroenteritis most, the rotavirus, is available in chemist shops. It is not included within the vaccination calendar and it can be only administered to babies.

When can my son go back to the kindergarten or school?

Since most of the cases of gastroenteritis in our country are not serious, the child's activity must not be limited. If the child does not feel well, vomits, has a temperature or stomach pain, it is advisable for him/her not to go to school until he/she feels better.

In kindergartens, it is recommended for the child to go back when defecation does not occur. If he/she uses nappies, he/she could be back if faeces remain in them. If faeces contain blood or mucus, it is recommended to wait until they become normal again.

When shall I go to my paediatrician?

The parents' main worry about gastroenteritis is the children's risk to become dehydrated. Generally speaking, common sense helps. The

main goal is to replace what has been lost and to stimulate early feeding. The best thing is to make an overall evaluation of the child's situation: if he/she is happy or cries with tears, if he/she slobbers and urinates as usual, or just play, he/she is not dehydrated.

For babies, who are vulnerable to suffer this illness again, it is to be observed if he/she is deteriorated, defecations are very frequent and specially often vomits, the losses cannot be re-

placed and rehydrating (it can always be done via mouth) must be supervised by a doctor who may decide if intravenous rehydrating in nursing home is needed.

It is easier to deal with elder children, as they ask for water when they are thirsty. This makes treatment easier and only when continuous vomiting occurs and in cases of great deterioration the assistance of further medical care will be needed.