

Diarrhea in Children



Overview

Diarrhea is the passage of frequent, loose, or liquid stools. In an infant or child, it can be very serious. If it lasts for more than a day, the child is at risk of dehydration. It is important for parents to be able to recognize and treat dehydration.

Causes

Diarrhea is usually caused by an infection. Parasites and bacteria can enter your body through bad food. And some viruses cause diarrhea. An allergy, food sensitivity, illness, or antibiotics may also cause diarrhea. Sometimes, diarrhea lasts for weeks. This is called "chronic diarrhea" and is a sign of a more serious condition.

Dehydration

The danger of diarrhea is dehydration. Early signs of dehydration are fast heartbeat, dry lips, mouth, and tongue, crying without tears, and no wet diapers for three hours or more. A severely dehydrated child may be sleepy and irritable and may have sunken eyes and cheeks. The soft spot on the top of the baby's head may look sunken. If left untreated, dehydration can lead to seizures, coma, and organ failure. It can be fatal.

Rehydration

If your child has diarrhea, it is important to keep him or her hydrated. Give the child liquids, Jell-o, or an over-the-counter rehydration solution. Avoid sugary sports drinks, juice, and soda, which can make dehydration worse.

When to See a Doctor

Drinking more fluids is usually enough to treat dehydration caused by diarrhea. Call your pediatrician or go to the ER if you see serious signs of dehydration or if the diarrhea lasts longer than 24 hours. A fever of 102 or higher or blood in the stool should also be treated by a doctor. If your child is vomiting frequently or can't keep liquids down, he or she may need IV fluids. Ask your doctor before using over-the-counter diarrhea medications.