



# Diarrhea

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Diarrhea is the sudden increase in the frequency and looseness of stools. The main risk of diarrhea is dehydration. Loose or runny stools do not cause dehydration. Frequent, watery stools can cause dehydration.

## Causes

- Viral gastroenteritis (viral infection of the stomach and intestines) is the usual cause
- Bacteria (e.g., Salmonella or Shigella) cause some diarrhea.
- Food-poisoning: Rapid onset of vomiting and diarrhea within hours after eating a food contaminated with toxins (e.g. cream dishes that are not properly refrigerated). The symptoms usually resolve in less than 24 hours without a need for medical care.

## Dehydration: How to Recognize

Dehydration means that the body has lost excessive fluids, usually from vomiting and/or diarrhea. An associated weight loss of more than 3% is required. In general, mild diarrhea, mild vomiting or a mild decrease in fluid intake does not cause dehydration.

*The following are signs of dehydration:*

- Decreased urination (no urine in more than 8 hours) occurs early in the process of dehydration. So does a dark yellow, concentrated yellow. If the urine is light straw colored, your child is not dehydrated.
- Dry tongue and inside of the mouth. Dry lips are not helpful.
- Dry eyes with decreased or absent tears
- In infants, a depressed or sunken soft spot
- Irritable, tired out or acting ill. If your child is alert, happy and playful, he or she is not dehydrated.
- A child with severe dehydration becomes too weak to stand or very dizzy if tries to stand.

## Definition of Diarrhea in Breastfed Infants

- The stools of a breastfed infant are normal unless they contain mucus or blood or develop a new bad odor.
- The looseness (normally runny and seedy), color (normally yellow) and frequency of stools (normally more than 6/day) are not much help. Breastfed babies may normally

- even pass some green stools surrounded by a water ring (normal bile can come out green if intestinal transit time is rapid enough).
- During the first 1 to 2 months of life, the breastfed baby may normally pass a stool after each feeding. (However, if an infant's stools abruptly increase in number and looseness and persist for 3 or more stools, the baby probably has diarrhea.)
  - Other clues to diarrhea are poor eating, acting sick, or a fever.

### **Definition of Diarrhea in Formula-Fed Infants**

- Formula-fed babies pass 1 to 8 stools per day during the first week, then 1 to 4 per day until 2 months of age.
- The stools are yellow in color and peanut butter in consistency.
- Formula-fed newborns have true diarrhea if the stools abruptly increase in number or looseness and persist for 3 or more stools, become watery or very runny, contain mucus or blood or develop a new bad odor.
- Other clues to diarrhea are poor eating, acting sick or a fever.
- After 2 months of age, most infants pass 1 or 2 stools per day (or 1 every other day) and no longer appear to have mild diarrhea.

### **Return to School**

Your child can return to child care or school after the stools are formed and the fever is gone. The school-aged child can return if the diarrhea is mild and the child has good control over loose stools.

*Adapted from the American Academy of Pediatrics at [www.healthychildren.org](http://www.healthychildren.org)*