

## **Your Vomiting Infant**

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### **First, a few words about infants and eating:**

As children develop, they acquire not only the ability to crawl and walk, but also show steady maturation of gut function. A newborn infant at term (not premature) has immature fat absorption, low gastric acid secretion, and cannot chew or swallow solids.

The child is a growing organism and adequate nutrition is essential--an infant needs many times more calories relative to its body size than does an adult. A proper balance of nutrients is also essential; for example, infants cannot be fed an adult nutritional formula such as Ensure because they would receive excessive protein.

Caring for a vomiting infant or child can sometimes be a scary and frustrating situation. A major advantage about most children is their general good health and their young and resilient body parts. Because of this, pediatric patients have a good chance of full recovery from illness.

### **What to do when your infant vomits:**

Vomiting can be caused by many factors, from a simple viral illness (stomach flu) to more serious illnesses. By far, though, most vomiting is due to viruses and can be safely handled at home with a few simple tasks and precautions.

If your infant is vomiting, the first thing to determine is if he is truly vomiting. All infants, to a certain degree, experience reflux. Reflux occurs as milk travels out of the stomach and back up into the esophagus. If your baby spits-up while burping, or if milk rolls out of the mouth when your baby is moved quickly after a feeding, it is not considered vomiting. This "gastroesophageal reflux" can be limited by not over-feeding, burping in the middle of feedings, and keeping your baby's head slightly elevated for 15-20 minutes after feeding.

Another thing to determine when faced with a vomiting infant is if the vomit is bilious. Vomit with bile will appear green; whereas, other vomit will be clear or light yellow or with food. If your child's vomit is green, you must seek medical attention immediately because that indicates there is an obstruction in your child's intestines. This is a medical emergency.

Once you have determined your infant is truly vomiting and it is not bilious, you should consider if your baby has a viral infection or "stomach flu." Often, a child has been in contact with a person who has been suffering from the same illness (hand washing is very important to limit transmission!). Viral infection of the gut is often associated with a low-grade fever and/or diarrhea and is the most common cause of vomiting in infants. The treatment is to prevent dehydration by replacing the fluids that are lost from vomiting (and diarrhea) while the body heals itself.

For infants who cannot keep breast milk or formula down, oral rehydration fluids (i.e. Pedialyte, etc.) are an excellent source of fluid. These rehydration fluids should only be used for a maximum of 8 hours, then formula or breast milk should be tried again. Infants who are eating table food can also have clear juices and food such as crackers, bread, applesauce and bananas while the vomiting is subsiding. If your child is also having diarrhea, juices should be avoided. These are very high in sugar and in some cases can actually pull liquid out of an inflamed gut and increase diarrhea.



Parents should give small amounts of fluids frequently throughout the day and night, rather than a normal sized feeding at longer intervals. Fluids can also be delivered slowly and frequently using an eye dropper or syringe every few minutes.

Most of these viral episodes last 5-7 days. Infants and children can vomit off and on for 2 to 3 days.

**When to go to the doctor:**

Although most cases of vomiting are not emergencies and don't require a visit to the doctor, you should know what signs due warrant medical attention to address more serious illness or other less common causes of vomiting. Bring your infant to the doctor if:

- The vomit is green (bilious) or bloody;
- You notice any signs of dehydration (no wet diapers or urine in 6-8 hours, dry mouth, no tears, excessive tiredness);
- Your child cannot keep anything down or vomiting lasts longer than one week;
- There is a high fever;
- Your child appears to have abdominal pain.
- **OR IF YOU ARE JUST UNSURE....ALWAYS ERROR ON THE SIDE OF CAUTION**

**Other Online Resources:**

American Gastroenterological Association  
<http://www.gastro.org/generalPublic.html>

North American Society for Pediatric Gastroenterology & Nutrition  
<http://www.naspghan.org/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
<http://www.cdc.gov/>

Healthfinder. Searchable Health and Human Services Department site linked to government and not-for-profit agencies, and self-help and support groups selected for their reliability.  
<http://www.healthfinder.gov/>