



Diarrhoea in Children, Causes and Symptoms

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Annotation: [Diarrhoea](#) is when your bowel movements are more frequent or looser than normal. If your child passes 3 or more loose or liquid stools (poos) in a day, it's diarrhoea. If their stools are soft, formed and solid, then it's not diarrhoea. Breastfed babies may pass soft, loose stools in a mustard yellow colour, but this is not diarrhoea either. See this article for [what's normal for baby poo](#).

Key words: [diarrhea](#), [viral gastroenteritis](#), [bacterial gastroenteritis](#), [antibiotics](#), [dehydration](#), [crohn's disease](#)

Diarrhoea in children is often due to 'gastro' — viral [gastroenteritis](#) — which is infectious and easily spread from person to person. Diarrhoea happens when not enough water is removed from your child's stool at the end of digestion. Or their body secretes too much fluid into the stool, making it loose. There are many different causes of diarrhoea in children. It can be caused by a short-term infection or be a symptom of an ongoing problem or chronic condition. There are some causes:

Viral gastroenteritis

Gastroenteritis is an infection of the bowel. Viruses are the most common cause of gastroenteritis in children. [Rotavirus](#), [norovirus](#), adenovirus and astrovirus can all cause gastroenteritis. These viruses are very infectious and are passed easily from person to person. Outbreaks happen more often in autumn and winter. Viral gastroenteritis normally starts with vomiting, which can last 1 or 2 days. There may be a low-grade fever. The diarrhoea, which is often watery, may go on for up to a week to 10 days.

Bacterial gastroenteritis

Bacterial gastroenteritis is an infection of the bowel caused by bacteria such as [salmonella](#), [E. coli](#), [shigella](#) and [campylobacter](#). These bacteria are sometimes linked to [food poisoning](#). Bacterial gastroenteritis may cause blood or mucus in the stool and high fever. It usually comes on suddenly.

Parasites

Parasites such as [giardia](#) and [cryptosporidiosis](#) may also cause gastroenteritis. These parasites live in rivers, lagoons and streams throughout Australia. They may also infect swimming pools, water parks and tank water. Giardia is common in Indigenous communities. It can cause ongoing or severe diarrhoea, stomach cramps, tiredness and weight loss. Symptoms of cryptosporidiosis include watery diarrhoea and stomach cramps, along with nausea, vomiting and loss of appetite.

Antibiotics

A course of [antibiotics](#) can sometimes wipe out 'good' bacteria as well as 'bad'. This leaves an imbalance of bacteria in the bowel, which can cause diarrhoea. This is called antibiotic-associated diarrhoea. See your doctor if you think antibiotics have caused your child's diarrhoea.

Lactose intolerance

[Lactose intolerance](#) is when your body can't digest lactose (a sugar found in milk and dairy products). It is not common in babies and children. When lactose intolerance does occur, it causes diarrhoea and tummy pain. Temporary lactose intolerance sometimes occurs after gastroenteritis. If you think your baby or child is lactose intolerant, see your doctor. Don't try to change their diet yourself.

Inflammatory bowel disease (IBD)



[Crohn's disease](#) and [ulcerative colitis](#) are 2 conditions collectively known as [inflammatory bowel disease](#). The symptoms, including diarrhoea, can flare up and then die down (remit). If your child has IBD they may lose weight for no obvious reason.

Children with diarrhoea may also have this symptoms, including:

- [abdominal pain](#) (tummy pain)
- [vomiting](#)
- [fever](#) or high temperature
- loss of appetite

Depending on the cause of the diarrhoea, the symptoms may vary.

Dehydration in babies, infants and children

Children with diarrhoea can easily become [dehydrated](#). Dehydration can be serious, even fatal. Babies or small children are particularly vulnerable to becoming dehydrated when they have diarrhoea. They can become unwell very quickly.

It's important to recognise if your child is dehydrated. The signs include:

- dry mouth, tongue and lips
- sunken eyes
- being listless or irritable
- shedding fewer tears when crying
- fewer wet nappies or wees than usual

Symptoms of severe dehydration include:

- not drinking much or refusing to drink
- feeling lethargic
- making no urine (wee) or only a very reduced amount of urine
- very sunken eyes
- very sunken [fontanelle](#) in a baby
- cold, pale or blotchy skin
- fast breathing

Severe dehydration is a medical emergency and can be fatal — get medical help for your child immediately.

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