OUR GP+

Information for patients, families and carers

Diarrhoea and tummy bugs

Gastroenteritis: caring at home, spotting dehydration and when to get help.

What is it?

Diarrhoea means passing loose or watery poo 3 or more times a day. It is most often caused by a tummy bug (**gastroenteritis**), usually a virus, or by food poisoning. **Most people get better on their own** within a few days without antibiotics. The main risk is losing too much fluid, called **dehydration**, so drinking enough is the most important thing you can do.

What you might notice

- Sudden loose or watery poo, often several times a day
- Tummy cramps that often ease after going to the toilet
- Being sick usually stops within 1 to 2 days
- Feeling sick or being sick, usually for the first day or two
- A mild temperature, aches, headache or feeling unwell
- Diarrhoea usually stops within 5 to 7 days

Common causes

Viruses

Most common: norovirus in adults, rotavirus in young children. Spreads easily.

Food poisoning

Bacteria from undercooked meat, eggs or poorly stored food, such as campylobacter.

Other causes

Travel abroad, germs in untreated water, and some medicines such as antibiotics.

Signs of dehydration

Early signs: drink more

- Feeling thirsty
- Dark yellow, strong-smelling pee
- Peeing less often than usual
- Dry mouth, lips and eyes
- Feeling tired, dizzy or light-headed
- Babies: fewer wet nappies

Serious signs: get help now

- Very drowsy, floppy or hard to wake
- Confused, or a child is unusually irritable
- Cold hands and feet, pale or blotchy skin
- Fast breathing or a racing heart
- Sunken eyes, or sunken soft spot in babies
- No pee at all for most of the day

Quick check: pale yellow pee means you are drinking enough. See the back page for who to call.

Who is more at risk of dehydration

babies under 1 | **older or frail people** | **diabetes, kidney or heart disease** | **a weak immune system** | **water or blood pressure tablets** | **lots of diarrhoea or vomiting**

Please turn over: caring at home, medicines and when to get help →

How you can help at home

Drink little and often
Small sips of water, often, even if you are being sick. Aim for pale yellow pee.

Rehydration sachets
From a pharmacy. Best for children, older people or anyone with signs of dehydration.

Keep feeding babies
Carry on breast or bottle feeds. Avoid fruit juice and fizzy drinks for children.

Eat when you can
Start with small, plain meals. Children can eat normally once they are rehydrated.

Wash hands well
Soap and water after the toilet and before food. Hand gel does not kill norovirus.

Stay home for 48 hours
No work, school or nursery until 2 days after the last diarrhoea or vomiting.

Don't share towels. Clean toilet seats, flush handles and taps every day, and wash dirty bedding and clothes separately at 60°C.

Medicines and diarrhoea

Antibiotics are rarely needed. Most tummy bugs are viruses, and antibiotics do not help.

Paracetamol can ease a temperature or aches. Follow the dose on the pack.

Anti-diarrhoea tablets (loperamide) may help adults for a day or two, but not children under 12, or anyone with blood in their poo or a high temperature.

Sick day rules. If you take water tablets, some blood pressure tablets, metformin or anti-inflammatories, ask us whether to pause them until you are eating and drinking again.

The pill. Being sick or severe diarrhoea can stop the contraceptive pill working. Check the leaflet or ask a pharmacist.

What the doctor will do

1. Ask about your symptoms, food, travel and medicines
2. Check for dehydration and examine your tummy
3. Test a poo sample if it is needed
4. Plan fluids and medicines, or arrange hospital care

Tell the GP how often you have had diarrhoea or been sick today, when you last had a pee, any blood in your poo, recent travel or antibiotics, and your usual medicines.

Call 999 if

someone is very drowsy, floppy or hard to wake; is confused; has cold, pale or blotchy skin; is breathing very fast; has a fit; is vomiting blood or green fluid; or has severe tummy pain that won't go away.

Contact us the same day if

there are signs of dehydration; you can't keep fluids down; there is blood or slime in the poo; a baby under 1 is unwell; you have a long-term condition or have been abroad; or diarrhoea lasts over 7 days or vomiting over 2 days.

Getting better: most people feel better within a few days, though your bowels may stay a little unsettled for a week or two. Diarrhoea that lasts more than 4 weeks, keeps coming back, wakes you at night or comes with weight loss is not a tummy bug, so please book to see us.

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Out of hours: NHS 24 on 111
More help: gutscharity.org.uk
Emergency: 999

Based on NICE CKS Gastroenteritis and BMJ Best Practice. October 2026.