

Vomiting - Infant

Because many common childhood illnesses can cause vomiting, you should expect your child to have this problem several times during these early years. Usually it ends quickly without treatment, but this doesn't make it any easier for you to watch. That feeling of helplessness combined with the fear that something serious might be wrong and the desire to do something to make it better may make you tense and anxious. To help put your mind at ease, learn as much as you can about the causes of vomiting and what you can do to treat your child when it occurs.

Vomiting vs Spitting Up

First of all, there's a difference between real vomiting and just spitting up. Vomiting is the forceful throwing up of stomach contents through the mouth. Spitting up (most commonly seen in infants under one year of age) is the easy flow of stomach contents out of the mouth, frequently with a burp.

Vomiting occurs when the abdominal muscles and diaphragm contract vigorously while the stomach is relaxed. This reflex action is triggered by the "vomiting center" in the brain after it has been stimulated by:

- Nerves from the stomach and intestine when the gastrointestinal tract is either irritated or swollen by an infection or blockage
- Chemicals in the blood (e.g., drugs)
- Psychological stimuli from disturbing sights or smells
- Stimuli from the middle ear (as in vomiting caused by motion sickness)

Causes of Vomiting

The common causes of spitting up or vomiting vary according to age. During the first few months, for instance, most infants will spit up small amounts of formula or breastmilk, usually within the first hour after being fed. This "cheesing," as it is often called, is simply the occasional movement of food from the stomach, through the tube (esophagus) leading to it, and out of the mouth. It will occur less often if a child is burped frequently and if active play is limited right after meals. This spitting up tends to decrease as the baby becomes older, but may persist in a mild form until ten to twelve months of age. Spitting up is not serious and doesn't interfere with normal weight gain.



Occasional vomiting may occur during the first month. If it appears repeatedly or is unusually forceful, call your pediatrician. It may be just a mild feeding difficulty, but it also could be a sign of something more serious.

Persistent Vomiting

Between two weeks and four months of age, persistent forceful vomiting may be caused by a thickening of the muscle at the stomach exit. Known as hypertrophic pyloric stenosis, this thickening prevents food from passing into the intestines. It requires immediate medical attention. Surgery usually is required to open the narrowed area. The important sign of this condition is forceful vomiting occurring approximately fifteen to thirty minutes or less after every feeding. Anytime you notice this, call your pediatrician as soon as possible.

GERD

Occasionally the spitting up in the first few weeks to months of life gets worse instead of better—that is, even though it's not forceful, it occurs all the time. This happens when the muscles at the lower end of the esophagus become overly relaxed and allow the stomach contents to back up. This condition is known as gastroesophageal reflux disease, or GERD. This condition usually can be controlled by doing the following:

1. Thicken the milk with small amounts of baby cereal as directed by your pediatrician.
2. Avoid overfeeding or give smaller feeds more frequently.
3. Burp the baby frequently.
4. Leave the infant in a safe, quiet, upright position for at least thirty minutes following feeding.

If these steps are not successful, your pediatrician may refer you to a gastrointestinal (GI) specialist.

Infection

After the first few months of life, the most common cause of vomiting is a stomach or intestinal infection. Viruses are by far the most frequent infecting agents, but occasionally bacteria and even parasites may be the cause. The infection also may produce fever, diarrhea, and sometimes nausea and abdominal pain. The infection is usually contagious; if your child has it, chances are good that some of her playmates also will be affected.

Rotaviruses are a leading cause of vomiting in infants and young children, with symptoms often progressing to diarrhea and fever. These viruses are very contagious, but are becoming less common than in the past, due to the availability of a vaccine that can prevent the disease. The rotavirus is one of the viral causes of gastroenteritis, but other types of viruses—such as noroviruses, enteroviruses, and adenoviruses—can cause it as well.



Occasionally infections outside the gastrointestinal tract will cause vomiting. These include infections of the respiratory system, infections of the urinary tract otitis media, meningitis, and appendicitis. Some of these conditions require immediate medical treatment, so be alert for the following trouble signs.

Whatever your child's age, call your pediatrician if your child has:

- Blood or bile (a green-colored material) in the vomit
- Severe abdominal pain
- Strenuous, repeated vomiting
- Swollen or enlarged abdomen
- Lethargy or severe irritability
- Convulsions
- Signs or symptoms of dehydration, including dry mouth, absent tears, depression of the "soft spot", and decreased urination
- Inability to drink adequate amounts of fluid
- Vomiting continuing beyond twenty-four hours

Adapted from the American Academy of Pediatrics at www.healthychildren.org

