

Preventing Dehydration From Diarrhea

Diarrhea (frequent loose or watery bowel movements) can be caused by bacteria, viruses, or parasites that infect the intestines. Diarrhea can also be caused by intolerance to substances found in some foods or by some medications. **Chronic diarrhea** (diarrhea that lasts for more than 2 to 3 weeks) can be a symptom of some chronic diseases.

An article in the January 17, 2001, issue of *JAMA* discusses the development of guidelines for testing stool samples for bacterial infection in hospitalized patients. Tests on stool samples can help determine the cause of diarrhea.

WHAT IS DEHYDRATION?

The body needs the correct amount of water and **electrolytes** (salts) to function properly. Diarrhea causes excess loss of fluids and essential electrolytes from the body. When fluid lost in the stools is not replaced, diarrhea can lead to **dehydration** (abnormally low water content in the body). Dehydration can be a life-threatening complication of diarrhea for some individuals, especially infants, small children, and elderly people.

PREVENTING DEHYDRATION

Diarrhea is a common problem that usually gets better on its own. Preventing dehydration is often the only treatment that is needed.

- Drink extra liquids to replace lost fluids. Specially formulated **oral rehydration solutions** (fluid and electrolyte replacement drinks), available at drug stores, are recommended for infants and children.
- Avoid drinks containing caffeine, such as coffee, tea, and some soft drinks, and alcohol
- Antidiarrheal medications are usually unnecessary and generally should be used only after consulting a physician. Medications used to treat adults with diarrhea who are otherwise healthy may be dangerous for children and elderly people

SIGNS OF DEHYDRATION

- Increased thirst
- Decreased urination
- Feeling weak or light-headed

Signs of dehydration in young children might also include:

- Dry mouth or tongue
- Few or no tears when crying
- No wet diapers for 3 hours or more
- Sunken eyes, cheeks, abdomen, or **fontanelle** (soft spot on top of the head)
- Irritability or **listlessness** (low energy)
- **Decreased skin turgor** (skin that flattens very slowly when pinched and released)



WHEN TO CONTACT A DOCTOR

Contact a doctor if diarrhea is accompanied by:

- Signs of dehydration
- Blood in the stools or black stools
- Frequent vomiting so fluids cannot be replaced by mouth
- Severe abdominal pain
- High fever
- No improvement after 24 hours or persistent diarrhea lasting longer than 3 to 4 days

Contact your doctor immediately if you suspect you or someone you know has become dehydrated.

Severe dehydration may require treatment with intravenous fluids (fluids provided directly into the blood stream). Do not depend on taking liquids by mouth to treat severe dehydration.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- American Academy of Pediatrics *Diarrhea and Dehydration Guidelines for Parents* www.aap.org/family/diah.htm
- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases *Diarrhea*
1 Information Way
Bethesda, MD 20892-3560
301/654-3327 or
www.niddk.nih.gov

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site (www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm).

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse*, American Academy of Pediatrics, *The AMA Complete Guide to Children's Health*, *The AMA Encyclopedia of Medicine*

Brian Pace, MA, Writer

Cassio Lynn, MA, Illustrator

Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor

The JAMA Patient Page is a public service of JAMA. The information and recommendations appearing on this page are appropriate in most instances, but they are not a substitute for medical diagnosis. For specific information concerning your personal medical condition, JAMA and the AMA suggest that you consult your physician. This page may be reproduced noncommercially by physicians and other health care professionals to share with patients. Any other reproduction is subject to AMA approval. To purchase bulk reprints, call 718/946-7424.

