

Information for children

What is toddler diarrhoea?

Toddler diarrhoea is the most frequent cause of chronic (that is persistent) diarrhoea in children between aged 1-5 years. It is more common in boys than girls.

How often do affected children poo?

Affected children will poo between two and ten times a day

What is the poo like?

The poo will be loose and watery. Sometimes it is pale coloured. It may be more smelly than usual and may contain undigested food.

How long does toddler diarrhoea last for?

Toddler diarrhoea continues for more than 3 weeks. It has usually stopped by the time the child is old enough to start school (about four to five years old).

Is the child ill?

No, children with toddler diarrhoea are well. They continue to grow and thrive. If your child is unwell, losing weight or not developing as you would expect, or if you have any other concerns, then take them to see their GP.

What else could it be?

If your child is unwell with tummy and/or headache, has diarrhoea, a raised temperature, is struggling to drink enough, is not as responsive as usual, or is vomiting, you should take them to see their GP. These symptoms could be caused by an infection.

Understanding toddler diarrhoea

Diarrhoea may be caused by intolerance to certain foods. Speak to your child's GP if they appear to have a bloated or swollen tummy, have wind, loose stools, or tummy cramping, especially after eating certain foods. You should also speak to your child's GP if you see blood in your child's poos.

If your child's poos are unpleasant smelling, sticky, infrequent (less than four poos per week), large, hard, painful, or if they are pooing in their pants, your child may have constipation. Speak to their GP or Health Visitor if this is happening. There is also more information about constipation on the Bladder & Bowel UK website at www.bbuk.org.uk

What causes toddler diarrhoea?

The cause of toddler diarrhoea is not completely understood, but is thought to be caused by a decreased bowel transit time: the food moves through the bowel more quickly than is usual. The large bowel absorbs water from the poo, so if the poo passes through too quickly, there is less time for the large bowel to absorb the water, so more water than usual remains in the poo, making it loose.

Some young children have a bowel that is slightly immature, so some foods may cause them to have diarrhoea.

How can the diarrhoea be helped?

Time and making some changes to your child's diet can help to make toddler diarrhoea better. It will usually get better for most children by their fifth birthday.

Making changes to your child's diet: The four F's

Always speak to your child's health visitor or other healthcare professional before changing your child's diet.

Fat - Children should get around 35% of their energy from the fat in their food. Fat slows the digestion in the gut and reduces the speed at which the food passes through the system. Adults need to eat less fat to guard against heart disease and obesity; this is not the case with young children.

Understanding toddler diarrhoea

Children should be given a range of foods with different fats in them, such as full-fat milk, yoghurt and rice pudding, butter, olive and rapeseed spreads and oils, dips like low-salt hummus, a few olives (these tend to be high in salt), avocado, meat, fish, eggs, almond/cashew/peanut butter, cheese, coconut milk, sunflower seeds. (Please be aware of any allergies or food intolerances your child has and if your child sees a dietician always follow their advice)

Fluid - Children need to drink 6-8 cups of water-based fluid each day (about 1 – 1.5 litres per day, depending on the age and activity levels of your child). Some children drink excessively, this can increase the diarrhoea. Excessive drinking is best managed by giving your child smaller amounts each time they ask, or just having drinks at set times, such as with meals and at snack times. Stick to water where possible.

Fruit juice/fruit squashes and fruit- Fructose is the natural sugar found in fruit. Drinking too much fruit juice may contribute to toddler diarrhoea. The immature gut cannot absorb fructose easily, so large quantities of fructose from fruit juice may be a cause of toddler diarrhoea.

Sorbitol is a sweetener found in many fruit drinks and foods. Large amounts of sorbitol may act like a laxative and cause diarrhoea.

Refined sugars are present in many ready-made foods, such as sweets, chocolates, cakes, biscuits and desserts and these may also cause looser poos.

Fibre- The fibre in the foods we eat, acts a bit like blotting paper in our gut. It soaks up some of the water, making the contents a bit bulkier. It also slows the gut contents down and helps the gut muscles to push the poo through, so helping us know when we need open our bowels. This is why eating fruit is unlikely to cause toddler diarrhoea, but drinking lots of fruit juices, which do not have the fibre in them, may cause a problem for some children.

If your child has a low fibre diet, try increasing their daily fibre intake. However, too much fibre may also irritate the gut and cause the diarrhoea. Keeping a food diary for a few days will help you to look at and adjust the fibre content of your child's diet. Your health visitor may also be able to make suggestions.



Understanding toddler diarrhoea

High fibre foods include:

- All vegetables
- Beans, peas, lentils and other pulses
- Potatoes, particularly if the skins are eaten
- Nuts and seeds
- All fruits
- Wholegrain cereals, brown, wholegrain or seeded breads, whole wheat pasta and oats.



Managing potty training, when a child has toddler diarrhoea

Toilet training should not be delayed due to toddler diarrhoea.

If loose poo means that your child does not get much warning when they need to open their bowels, a small disposable pad in their pants, or washable training pants to protect their clothes might be helpful. Sitting them on the potty or toilet 20-30 minutes after meals, drinks, snacks and bath time may help you catch a poo in the right place as the gut speeds up at these times. Remember to praise your child if they do manage to get a poo in the right place.

If your child does not manage to get the poo in the potty or toilet, they should be changed as soon as possible, to reduce the likelihood of sore skin. Thinly applied nappy rash cream can protect their skin and prevent soreness.

Further information

Find more information about child bladder and bowel health in our information library at www.bbuk.org.uk. You can also contact the [Bladder & Bowel UK confidential helpline](tel:01612144591) (0161 214 4591).

For further advice on bladder and bowel problems speak to your GP or other healthcare professional.
