



Bladder & Bowel UK

Supporting people with bladder and bowel problems

part of Disabled Living

Understanding Toddler Diarrhoea



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What is 'toddler diarrhoea'?

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

How often do affected children poo?

The child will have at least two poos daily, but may have as many as ten a day.

What is the poo like?

Loose and watery, sometimes pale coloured, the poo may be more smelly than usual and may contain undigested food.

How long does it last for?

It continues for more than three weeks, but has usually cleared up by the time the child reaches school age

Is the child ill?

No, they will continue to grow and thrive. They will not appear unwell. (Take them to the GP if they are unwell, losing weight or not developing as you would expect, or if you have any other concerns.)

What else could it be?

If the child is unwell with tummy and/ or headache, has diarrhoea, has a temperature, is struggling to drink enough, is less responsive, or vomiting, you should see the GP. It could be an infection.

It could be an intolerance to certain food, such as lactose – ask your GP if the child appears to have a bloated abdomen (tummy), is windy and has loose stools and tummy cramping, especially after eating foods high in lactose (a natural sugar found in milk).

If your child has offensive smelling, sticky poos; often poos in their clothing, having previously had poos that were infrequent (less than three per week); large, hard, or painful poos they may be constipated. Speak to their GP or Health Visitor.

What causes toddler Diarrhoea?

The cause is not completely understood. It is thought that some children may have a fast gut transit time (the time it takes for the food to move through the bowel). As part of the role of the bowel is to absorb water, if things move through too quickly, a lot of the fluid remains in the poo. This is because the poo is not there long enough for the excess water to be removed.

Some young children have a bowel that is slightly immature, so that certain types of the food they eat can cause them to have diarrhoea.

How can the diarrhoea be helped?

The good news is that with time and by making adjustments to your child's diet the diarrhoea will resolve.

The four F's

Fat: Children should not eat a low fat diet. They should get around 35% of their energy from the fat in their food. Fat slows the digestion in the gut and 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 same with children.

Children should be given a range of foods with different fats in them. Full-fat milk and products like yoghurt and rice pudding; butter, olive and rapeseed spreads and oils; dips like a low salt hummus; a few olives (these do tend to be high in salt); avocado, meat, fish, eggs, almond/cashew/peanut butter, cheese, coconut milk, sunflower seeds all contain fats. (Please be aware of any allergies)

Fluid: Children need to drink 6-8 cups of fluid each day. Some children drink too many sugary drinks, this can increase the diarrhoea. Excessive drinking is best managed by giving smaller amounts each time they ask, or just having drinks at set times, with meals and snack times. Stick to water or full fat milk where possible. Toddlers should be having about a pint (half a litre) or milk a day, as well as their water-based drinks

Fruit juice/fruit squashes and fruit: The immature gut cannot absorb fructose easily – this is the natural sugar in fruit. If too much is eaten it can irritate the gut, causing the contents to go through too quickly. A similar thing happens with sorbitol – a sweetener found in many fruit drinks and foods.

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

The fructose in fresh or tinned, fruit, fruit that has been frozen, does not cause so many problems. This is, because the fibre is still in it and the fibre slows the gut down a bit (see next section)

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 more bulky, slows things down a bit, and helps the gut to push it through and lets us to know it is ready for passing into the toilet. So if your child has a low fibre diet, increase it to around 12-18 grammes per day.

However, too much fibre can also irritate the gut, causing the contents to move through too quickly.

Keeping a food diary for a few days will help you to look at the fibre content of your child's diet and adjust it. Aim for 12-18 grammes per day.

These are higher fibre foods. Changing the quantity of these in your child's diet may help:

- Fruits especially berries, pears, melon and oranges
- Vegetables especially broccoli, carrots, sweet corn
- Beans, peas and pulses
- Potatoes (eat the skins too)
- Nuts and seeds
- Wholegrain cereals and breads, whole wheat pasta and oats

Managing potty training, when a child has Toddler diarrhoea

Once the above dietary changes are complete, the child's stool should be more manageable and toilet training should continue as usual.

If your child lacks the sensation to warn them that they need to go for a poo, as the poo is still quite loose, they may need to wear a pad in their pants to protect them from the embarrassment of leaking. It is also helpful to put them on the potty or toilet about 20-30 minutes after meals, drinks or snacks, as well as after bath time. The gut speeds up at these times and you are more likely to successfully catch a poo in the potty/toilet. Remember to praise them.

If your child needs to wear pads or disposable pants, these should be changed as soon as they are soiled, to reduce the chance of sore skin. Thinly applied nappy rash cream can protect the skin from becoming sore.

For further information and advice regarding all aspects of bladder and bowel health look at the Bladder & Bowel UK website resources page at <https://www.bbuk.org.uk/children-young-people/children-resources/> or contact us via our confidential helpline Telephone: 0161 607 8219 or email bladderandboweluk@disabledliving.co.uk



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Bladder and Bowel UK, part of the charity Disabled Living, provides professional impartial advice and information regarding treatments, products and services for children and adults with bowel and/or bladder problems

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