

Dietary Management of Toddler Diarrhoea

This dietary advice sheet gives some general information to help you make the recommended changes to your child's diet. If you need more detailed advice or if your child is following a special diet that makes it difficult for you to make these changes, please ask your doctor to refer your child to a registered dietitian.

What is toddler diarrhoea?

Toddler diarrhoea is the most common cause of persistent diarrhoea in young children. It mainly occurs at 1-4 years of age. It is not a serious problem and the child is usually well and their growth is good.

Children with this problem generally have 2 or more watery loose bowel motions (stools) per day. Sometimes it can be as many as 8-10 times per day. The stools tend to be more smelly and paler than usual. Bits of undigested vegetables (for example, sweetcorn, carrots etc) can often be seen in the stool. Mild stomach pain sometimes occurs, but it is unusual. However, parents can find the diarrhoea both a worry and an inconvenience which can lead to possible problems with potty training.

Toddler diarrhoea will usually resolve itself by 4-5 years of age.

What causes toddler diarrhoea?

The cause is not fully understood. The food we eat is broken down in the stomach and then absorbed in the small bowel (the first part of your bowel). The large bowel is responsible for absorbing excessive water and producing formed stools. In toddler diarrhoea there may be an imbalance of fluid, fibre and undigested sugars that reach the large bowel and excessive fluid is passed out in loose stools.

Toddler diarrhoea is **not** due to poor absorption of food and is **not** a serious bowel problem. Your child will usually still get all the nutrients they need from the food they eat, and continue to grow well.

What is the treatment for toddler diarrhoea?

Changing the types of foods your child eats usually helps. Foods which are high in fibre or sugar, and drinking plenty of fluid can lead to toddler diarrhoea. A low fat diet can also contribute to it.

Sugars

Refined sugars and sweeteners in a child's diet include fizzy drinks, squashes, sweets and chocolate and table sugar added to foods (e.g. breakfast cereals) and can cause toddler diarrhoea. Even fruit juices, which are often seen as a healthier option, still contain natural sugar which can also cause a problem, especially pure apple juice due to the fermentation process of the apples.

It is best to only give your child water or milk to drink. If they currently will not drink water, gradually make their squash/juice more and more dilute until they are just taking water.

Fluid

Excessive drinking can also cause diarrhoea. Children need plenty of fluid (5-8 drinks a day) but some toddlers like to drink almost constantly! This is often more for comfort than because of thirst. It is a good idea to plan set times for drinks e.g. with snacks and at mealtimes and don't offer drinks in-between. Use distraction methods if necessary. Children will drink enough to quench their thirst so don't worry about dehydration.

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Fibre

Although we usually encourage a good fibre intake as part of a healthy diet, young children often cannot tolerate high fibre foods very well. Foods that often cause loose stools are high fibre breakfast cereals, especially oat based foods e.g. Weetabix, porridge (compare fibre content of different cereals to find out which ones are higher or lower in fibre), flapjacks, certain fruit and vegetables such as grapes, raisins, peas, sweetcorn, baked beans (see food list on the following page for more details).

Fat

Fat in the diet slows down the speed food moves through the gut and therefore giving your child a reasonably high fat diet may help. It has been found that especially giving a small amount of a high fat food at the end of a meal can help to reduce loose stools e.g. yogurt, ice-cream, full fat mousse and other dairy desserts, full fat milk or even a cube of cheese!

Food group	Foods to limit	Foods to include
Drinks	Fruit juices, fizzy drinks and squashes including sugar-free versions	Full fat cow's milk, water
Fruit	Grapes, raisins	All other fruit
Vegetables	Peas, baked beans, other pulses, sweetcorn	All other vegetables
Cereals	High fibre breakfast cereals e.g. Weetabix, Ready Brek, cereals with raisin/fruit, muesli Wholemeal bread	Lower fibre cereal, e.g. Cornflakes, Rice Krispies White bread
Meat/fish/eggs/cheese	None	All meats/fish/eggs/cheese
Dairy foods	Low fat versions of milk, yogurt, mousse, ice-cream etc	Full fat versions of milk, yogurt, mousse, ice-cream etc
Sugary foods	Sweets and chocolate*, added table sugar to food/drinks	

* If chocolate is given, it is best to give a small piece at the end of a meal rather than on it's own in - between meals

Does my child always need to eat like this?

No, a lower fibre and higher fat diet is usually needed while your child is experiencing loose stools and they should grow out of toddler diarrhoea by 4 – 5 years.

The recommended healthy diet for children of 5 years and over is to have plenty of fibre and not eat too much fat.

What if these dietary changes do not help?

If after one month of making these dietary changes in your child's diet, your child is still having more than two bowel motions a day, please ask your GP or Health Visitor to refer your child to a Paediatrician or Paediatric Dietitian.

