



DEHYDRATION: IN BABIES & CHILDREN

WHAT IS DEHYDRATION?

Dehydration occurs when the body loses more fluids than it takes in, making it difficult to function properly. Fluids help regulate body temperature, support bodily functions, and transport nutrients.

Young children and babies are at greater risk of dehydration than adults. Keeping your child hydrated is essential, especially when they are unwell.

If your child is very thirsty, they are likely already dehydrated. Severe dehydration can be serious and requires immediate medical attention.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Mild to Moderate Dehydration:

- Dizziness or light-headedness
- Nausea or headaches
- Dark yellow or brown urine (urine should be pale yellow)
- Fewer wet nappies or reduced toilet visits
- Dry lips, tongue, mouth, or throat

Severe Dehydration: (Seek immediate medical attention)

- Extreme thirst
- Lethargy or reduced activity
- Pale skin and sunken eyes (no tears when crying)
- Cold hands or feet
- Rapid breathing and fast heart rate
- **Irritability, drowsiness, or confusion**
- **Sunken fontanelle (soft spot on a baby's head)**

If your child shows severe dehydration signs, call triple zero (000) or go to the nearest emergency department.

CAUSES OF DEHYDRATION

Children can become dehydrated due to:

- Vomiting and diarrhoea (common with illnesses like gastroenteritis)
- Fever (higher body temperature increases fluid loss)
- Hot weather (excess sweating)
- Not drinking enough fluids (especially when unwell)
- Intense physical activity (losing fluids through sweat)
- Certain medications (such as diuretics, which increase urine production)

CARING FOR YOUR CHILD AT HOME

Caring for Mild Dehydration at Home

The best treatment is to replace lost fluids. Offer:

Water or **oral rehydration solutions** (e.g., Gastrolyte, HYDRALyte, Pedialyte, Repalyte, available at pharmacies or supermarkets)

Diluted apple juice if your child refuses water or rehydration fluids

Usual milk (breastmilk or formula) for babies over six months

Avoid:

- Sugary drinks like sports drinks, soft drinks, and undiluted fruit juices (can worsen dehydration)
- Caffeinated drinks (can increase fluid loss)

Managing Dehydration by Age

Babies under 6 months:

- Should always be seen by a doctor if dehydrated.
- Continue breastfeeding more frequently or offer small amounts of oral rehydration solution (ORS) or water.

Babies over 6 months:

- Breastfeeding: Continue feeding more often.
- Formula-fed: Replace formula feeds with ORS or water for the first 12 hours, then resume formula in smaller, frequent amounts.

Older Children (Over 10kg):

- Offer at least **one cup (250mL) of water or ORS per hour** for four hours.
- Increase intake if they have diarrhoea or vomiting.
- Encourage sipping fluids frequently.

PREVENTING DEHYDRATION

Preventing Dehydration

- Encourage regular water intake (more in hot weather and during illness).
- Avoid excessive sugary drinks.
- Offer additional fluids when exercising or unwell.
- Ensure babies and young children are given enough breastmilk, formula, or water as needed.

RECOMMENDED DAILY FLUID INTAKE

- Babies 0-6 months: Breastmilk/formula only.
- Infants 6-12 months: Breastmilk/formula + small amounts of boiled, cooled water.
- Toddlers (1-3 years): ~1 litre (4 cups) of fluids.
- Children (4-8 years): ~1.2 litres (5 cups) of fluids.
- Pre-teens (9-13 years): ~1.4-1.6 litres (5-6 cups) of fluids.
- Teenagers (13+ years): ~1.6-1.9 litres (6-8 cups) of fluids.

Mix of water and Oral rehydration solutions (ORS) and Water should always be the first choice.

WHEN TO SEE A DOCTOR

Seek medical advice if your child:

- Is under 6 months old and shows dehydration signs
- Has ongoing vomiting for more than 24 hours
- Has diarrhoea lasting more than a few days
- Refuses fluids or cannot keep them down
- Hasn't urinated in **6-8 hours** (or hasn't had a wet nappy in **4-6 hours**)
- Vomits blood or has bloody diarrhoea
- Severe dehydration may require **hospital treatment**, such as IV fluids or tube feeding.
-

KEY POINTS

- Young children and babies are most at risk of dehydration.
- Mild dehydration can be managed at home with oral rehydration fluids or water.
- Severe dehydration is a medical emergency - seek immediate medical help.
- Prevent dehydration by ensuring adequate fluid intake daily.

DISCLAIMER

This fact sheet provides general information only. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Always consult a doctor if concerned about your child's health.

