

Abdominal pain in children

Children often complain of stomach pain. It is one of the most common reasons parents take children to their doctor or the hospital emergency department. Stomach pain can be hard to diagnose. The doctor will ask you questions then examine your child. Sometimes a problem may be quite obvious, so no tests are needed.

Many children with stomach pain get better in hours or days without special treatment and often no cause can be found. Sometimes the cause becomes more obvious with time and treatment can be started. If pain or other problems persist, see your doctor.

A range of causes

There are many health problems that can cause stomach pain for children, including:

- **Bowel (gut) problems** – constipation, colic or irritable bowel.
- **Infections** – gastroenteritis, kidney or bladder infections, or infections in other parts of the body like the ear or chest.
- **Food-related problems** – too much food, food poisoning or food allergies.
- **Problems outside the abdomen** – muscle strain or migraine.
- **Surgical problems** – appendicitis, bowel obstruction or intussusception (telescoping of part of the gut).
- **Period pain** – some girls can have pain before their periods start.
- **Poisoning** – such as spider bites, eating soap or smoking.

Repeat attacks of stomach pain

Some children suffer repeat attacks of stomach pain, which can be worrying for parents. Often, no health problem can be found.

Children may feel stomach pain when they are worried about themselves or people around them. Think about whether there is anything that is upsetting your child at home, school or kindergarten, or with friends. See your local doctor for advice. A referral may be needed to a paediatrician (a doctor that specialises in children).

Appendicitis explained

Appendicitis is one of the more common reasons your child may need surgery. The appendix is a small, dead-end tube leading from a part of the bowel. If this tube gets blocked, it can cause an infection. Appendicitis can happen at any age, but is rare in young children.

The pain often starts in the middle of the tummy and moves down low on the right side. The tummy becomes sore to touch. This is often worse with coughing and walking around. A child with appendicitis often shows signs of being unwell such as fever, refusing food, vomiting or (sometimes) diarrhoea.

If you are concerned your child may be developing appendicitis, visit your local doctor or go to the emergency department of your nearest hospital. An operation is often needed to remove the appendix, although in some cases the problem will settle without surgery.

Diagnosis

When a problem is quite obvious, no tests are needed. If tests are needed, they may include:

- Blood tests
- Urine test
- Stool (poo) sample
- X-rays
- Other special tests
- Review by a specialist doctor.

If your child does undergo tests, the doctor should explain the results to you. Some results may take a number of days to come back and these results will be sent to your local doctor.

Treatment

Your child's treatment will depend on what the doctor thinks is causing their pain. Treatment may be as simple as sending your child home with advice to rest, take fluids and eat a bland diet. Other treatment options include hospital admission and surgery.

Taking care of your child at home

General suggestions on easing the pain include:

- Ensure your child gets plenty of rest.
- Help your child drink plenty of clear fluids such as cooled boiled water or juice.
- Do not push your child to eat if they feel unwell.
- If your child is hungry, offer bland food such as crackers, rice, bananas or toast.
- Place a hot water bottle or wheat bag on your child's tummy or run a warm bath for them. Please take care not to scald yourself or your child.
- Give paracetamol if your child is in pain or is miserable. Remember that doses for children are often different to those for adults so please check the packet carefully for the right dose. Avoid giving aspirin.

Seek urgent medical help

Go to your local doctor or the emergency department of your nearest hospital straight away if your child has:

- Severe or worsening pain or pain that has moved position
- Fever or chills
- Become pale, sweaty and unwell
- Been vomiting for more than 24 hours
- Refused to eat or drink
- Blood in their vomit or poo
- Problems passing urine or is producing less than four wet nappies a day
- Skin rash with pain
- Any other problem that concerns you.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Nurse-on-Call Tel. 1300 606 024 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- The emergency department of your nearest hospital
- Always call an ambulance in an emergency Tel. 000
- Paediatrician
- The Gut Foundation Tel. (02) 9382 2749

Things to remember

- Many children with stomach pain get better in hours or days without special treatment and often no cause can be found.
- If pain or other problems persist, see your doctor.
- Appendicitis is one of the more common reasons your child may need surgery.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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