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Gastroenteritis (Stomach Virus)

Expected Duration: In children, most cases of mild, uncomplicated gastroenteritis last about two to three days. However, even after most symptoms go away, your child may continue to have occasional loose stools for more than a week.

Prevention: It would be ideal never to get these infections in the first place and being up-to-date with your child's vaccines can help reach that goal. For example, young infants should receive the rotavirus vaccine, which has been shown to protect children against 85% to 98% of severe illness from rotavirus. In addition, to help prevent gastroenteritis in all members of your family, you can take the following steps: Wash your hands frequently with soap and water, especially after using the toilet, after changing diapers and after caring for a child with diarrhea. An alcohol-based hand sanitizer should NOT be used alone. Wash your hands with soap and water before and after preparing food, especially after handling raw meat. An alcohol-based hand sanitizer should NOT be used alone. Wash diarrhea-soiled clothing in detergent and chlorine bleach. If bathroom surfaces are contaminated with stool, wipe them with a chlorine-based household cleaner. Cook all meat thoroughly before you serve it to your family, and refrigerate leftovers within two hours. Make sure you don't transfer cooked foods onto unwashed plates that held raw meat. Wash kitchen countertops and utensils thoroughly after they have been used to prepare meat. Never drink unpasteurized milk, unpasteurized apple cider or untreated water. If you travel to an area where sanitation is poor, make sure that your family drinks only bottled water or soft drinks, and that they don't eat ice, uncooked vegetables or fruit that they haven't peeled themselves. If your child attends day care, make sure that all day-care personnel wash their hands frequently, especially after changing soiled diapers and before preparing food.

Treatment: In otherwise healthy children, most cases of mild gastroenteritis gradually go away within a few days. In the meantime, you can try the following suggestions: To prevent dehydration, encourage your child to drink plenty of fluids. In general, breast milk or formula in an infant and water, Gatorade/PowerAde, or Pedialyte are better than soft drinks, fruit juice or other sweetened beverages, which usually have too many carbohydrates (sugar) and too little sodium (salt) to restore normal fluid balance in children with gastroenteritis. If your child is too nauseated to drink his or her normal intake of fluids at one sitting, try offering several smaller sips more frequently over a longer period. Once your child's vomiting subsides, resume a normal diet gradually while continuing the oral rehydration solution. Begin with crackers, toast, and complex carbohydrates, such as rice, potatoes and pasta. Temporarily avoid fatty foods and sugary beverages. If your child is breastfeeding, resume nursing as soon as possible. Do not give your child anti-diarrhea medicines. These can interfere with the intestine's ability to pass harmful viruses, bacteria, parasites and toxins out of the body through the stool. This can make it harder to know when your child is actually getting sicker and needs more attention. Have your child rest in bed until symptoms subside. Do not allow your child to return to school until diarrhea has begun to improve. If your child is showing signs of significant dehydration and cannot drink fluids, you might need to take him or her to the hospital to receive fluids intravenously (through a vein). This usually only happens after several days of symptoms.