

# Chronic Diarrhea

Diarrhea lasting longer than 2 weeks is considered chronic diarrhea. Your child should have an examination and possibly tests to find out why he or she is having continued problems with diarrhea. Many causes of chronic diarrhea are possible but most are not serious.

## What is chronic diarrhea?

Diarrhea simply means loose bowel movements, usually frequent. Most of the time, the problem resolves on its own.

Chronic diarrhea means diarrhea lasting for at least 2 weeks. (Acute diarrhea means the diarrhea lasts for only a limited time and is most often caused by an infection.) Over time, continued diarrhea can lead to problems with nutrition.

There are many possible causes of chronic diarrhea. Often, however, no specific cause can be found. Careful evaluation will help to determine what is causing your child's chronic diarrhea and to identify the best form of treatment.

## What does it look like?

- Weight loss or other symptoms may be present, or diarrhea may be your child's only symptom.
- Chronic diarrhea can occur in children at any age, from infancy through the teenage years.

## What causes chronic diarrhea?

There is a long list of possible causes:

- *Infection.* It may result from an infection that has never cleared up or has caused damage to the intestines.
- *Foods/dietary causes.* It may be caused by something in your child's diet, for example, food allergy or lactose intolerance. Toddlers sometimes get diarrhea from drinking too much fruit juice. It may also result from medications, for example, as a side effect of antibiotics or from overuse of laxatives.
- *Other diseases.* Diarrhea may be caused by certain diseases, including inflammatory bowel disease (ulcerative colitis or Crohn's disease), celiac disease, or malformations of the intestines.
- Even less commonly, diarrhea may be a symptom of more serious diseases (such as cystic fibrosis or immune disorders such as HIV infection).
- Finally, in many children with chronic diarrhea, no specific cause can be found. This is called *idiopathic* diarrhea, which simply means that the cause is unknown. Treatment, including nutritional support, may help to maintain your child's nutrition while giving the diarrhea time to resolve.

## What are some possible complications of chronic diarrhea?

Adequate nourishment is the main challenge in children with chronic diarrhea. Regardless of the cause of your child's diarrhea, he or she may need nutritional support.

## Can chronic diarrhea be prevented?

There is no practical way to prevent all possible causes of chronic diarrhea. Getting prompt evaluation and treatment may prevent diarrhea from becoming a persistent problem.

## How is the cause of chronic diarrhea diagnosed?

- Your child will undergo evaluation and possible testing in an attempt to find out what is causing the diarrhea. Your child may be referred to a *gastroenterologist*, an expert in diseases of the intestines. Your doctor will ask you to provide information on what your child eats and drinks. You may be asked to make a detailed record of everything your child eats over a 3-day period. Samples of your child's bowel movements may be tested for infection and other possible abnormalities. Some routine blood tests may be performed.
- If the cause is still unknown after examination and initial tests, further tests may be carried out. The goal of these tests is to make sure your child doesn't have some of the more serious, less common diseases that can cause chronic diarrhea. Your doctor is more likely to recommend these tests if your child has been losing weight or not gaining enough weight.
- X-rays and other tests may be done. These may include endoscopy, in which an instrument like a small telescope is used to examine your child's gastrointestinal tract. This is done by a gastroenterologist.

## How is chronic diarrhea treated?

Treatment for chronic diarrhea depends on the results of examination and testing:

- If a specific cause is identified, treating the problem will eliminate the diarrhea. In many cases, the cause of diarrhea is relatively simple:
  - *Infections with bacteria or parasites.* May be treated with antibiotics.
  - *Food/dietary factors.* Your child may be allergic to or unable to tolerate something in his or her diet (for example, lactose intolerance). In that case, the diarrhea should improve once that food is removed from your child's diet.

- *Fruit juice.* Drinking too much fruit juice is a common cause of chronic diarrhea in toddlers. Cutting back on the amount of fruit juice your child drinks may improve the problem with diarrhea.
- *Malabsorption.* Another possible cause is a malabsorption syndrome. This means that your child's intestines are not working properly to absorb the nutrients from foods. The doctor will try to treat the cause of malabsorption.
- *Medications.* If a medication is causing the diarrhea, then the medication will be stopped if possible. Chronic diarrhea in teenagers is sometimes caused by overuse of laxatives, which may be a sign of an eating disorder.
- Chronic diarrhea can be the first symptom of a more serious underlying disease, such as pancreatitis, cystic fibrosis, or HIV disease.
- Even if no cause for your child's diarrhea can be identified, your doctor can still offer some helpful treatments. A special diet may be easier for your child to digest, while providing a chance for the intestines to heal. Less frequently, some type of artificial (parenteral) nutrition may be needed to provide temporary nutritional support. This type of nutritional support will be used for as short a time as possible.



### When should I call your office?

During evaluation and treatment for chronic diarrhea, your child will be seen regularly to keep track of his or her weight and growth. Call our office if:

- Your child has continued diarrhea despite treatment.
- Your child is losing weight or not gaining enough weight.