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DIARRHEA

Diarrhea is one of the commonest problems faced by children; the average preschooler has two or three episodes a year. It is more frequent in children in daycare.

Diarrhea is defined as a child's having significantly more stools than is "normal" for age; often these stools are loose or watery. They can be yellow, white, brown, green, black, or bloody. Most stool changes are not worrisome, but black or bloody stools are potentially dangerous, and should be brought to our attention immediately. "Normal" varies from child to child, changing with age, diet, etc, but it is usually fairly clear when such a difference occurs.

WHEN SHOULD I WORRY?

Most episodes of diarrhea are not dangerous to children. They are messy and uncomfortable, but not generally liable to cause serious dehydration, hospitalization, etc. Most are, however, contagious. Diarrheal stools which are accompanied by vomiting so that the child cannot take fluids, by fever, by abdominal pain, by a black color, or by blood can represent a serious risk. You should call us if these occur with the diarrhea.

You should also be concerned if your child is having ten or more stools per day, or is becoming dehydrated. Symptoms of dehydration include dry mouth, dry eyes, a sunken fontanelle (soft spot) in a small baby, urination no more often than every 12 hours, general lethargy or malaise, or an acute weight loss of examination and, possibly, laboratory work.

CAUSES OF DIARRHEA

Most diarrhea is caused by intestinal virus infection such as Rotavirus, often called "stomach flu". Mild to moderate diarrhea can also be caused by food intolerance (i.e.: milk), antibiotics, excessive fruit (apple, pear) juice, sugarless (sorbitol-containing) gum, stress & nervousness, and sometimes strep throat or ear infections, teething, etc. Other, more serious causes include food poisoning, such as salmonella, staph, or e coli (often from undercooked meat), or parasites picked up in untreated water (Giardia is common in the Boulder area).

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ASK

Whenever these symptoms develop you must answer for yourself two important questions: (1) Is this problem a simple viral gastroenteritis or ear infection or is it the first sign of a more worrisome situation? (2) Is this problem causing significant dehydration? Generally, a child with a more critical underlying illness or with dehydration will act very quiet and withdrawn, possibly with some pain symptoms, and not be interested in taking food or even fluids. However, in simple viral diarrhea with no serious dehydration, the child will be almost normally active, and interested in drinking. If you are concerned that the problem is not a simple one, or if you believe that the youngster is dehydrated, then he/she should be examined by a physician.

