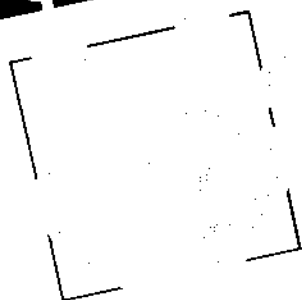


What every family and community has
a right to know about.

Diarrhoea



Note to communicators

Diarrhoea causes dehydration, and malnutrition and kills over 3 million children every year.

The seven health messages in this chapter can help parents and communities to prevent almost all of these deaths and most of the malnutrition caused by diarrhoea.

The main causes of diarrhoea are poor hygiene, lack of clean drinking water, overcrowding, and the trend towards bottle-feeding rather than breastfeeding. It is the responsibility of government to support the community in tackling these basic problems.

Diarrhoea Prime Messages

- 1** Diarrhoea can kill children by draining too much liquid from the body. So it is essential to give a child with diarrhoea plenty of liquids to drink.
- 2** A child with diarrhoea needs food.
- 3** When a breastfed child has diarrhoea, it is important to continue breastfeeding.
- 4** A child who is recovering from diarrhoea needs an extra meal every day for at least two weeks.
- 5** Trained help is needed if diarrhoea is more serious than usual, if it persists for more than two weeks, or if there is blood in the stool.

6 Medicines other than ORS should not be used for diarrhoea, except on medical advice.

7 Diarrhoea can be prevented by breastfeeding, by immunizing all children against measles, by using latrines, by keeping food and water clean, and by washing hands before touching food.



Diarrhoea

Supporting Information



1

Diarrhoea can kill children by draining too much liquid from the body. So it is essential to give a child with diarrhoea plenty of liquids to drink.

- Diarrhoea is dangerous. Roughly one in every two hundred children who get diarrhoea will die from it.
- Most often, diarrhoea kills by dehydration. This means that too much liquid has been drained out of the child's body. So as soon as diarrhoea starts, it is essential to give the child extra drinks to replace the liquid being lost.
- Suitable drinks to prevent a child from losing too much liquid during diarrhoea are:
 - breastmilk
 - gruels (mixtures of cooked cereals and water)
 - soups
 - rice water
 - fresh fruit juices
 - weak teas
 - green coconut water
 - water from the cleanest possible source (if possible, brought to the boil and then cooled)
 - oral rehydration salts solution.
- In almost all countries, special drinks for children with diarrhoea are available in pharmacies, shops, or health centres. Usually, these come in the form of packets of oral rehydration salts (ORS) to be mixed with the recommended amount of clean water (*see box*). Although ORS is especially made for the treatment of dehydration, it can also be used to prevent dehydration.

Do not add ORS to liquids such as milk, soup, fruit juice or soft drinks.

○ If ORS is not available, dehydration can be treated by giving the child a drink made from four level teaspoons of sugar and half a level teaspoon of salt dissolved in one litre of clean water.

This is less salt and less sugar than recommended in the first edition of *Facts for Life*. In practice, too much salt and sugar have sometimes been used because spoon sizes differ and because parents sometimes add more salt and sugar in the belief that this will make the treatment more effective. But too much sugar can make the diarrhoea worse and too much salt can be harmful to the child. Therefore a more dilute formula is now recommended. If the mixture is made a little too dilute, no harm can be done, and there is very little loss of effectiveness.

○ To replace the liquid being lost from the child's body, one of these drinks should be given to the child every time a watery stool is passed:

○ between a quarter and a half of a large cup for a child under the age of two

○ between a half and a whole large cup for older children.

○ The drink should be given directly from a cup or by a teaspoon - not from a feeding bottle. If the child vomits, wait for 10 minutes and then begin again, giving the drink to the child slowly, small sips at a time.

○ Extra liquids should be given until the diarrhoea has stopped. This will usually take between three and five days.

ORS - a special drink

A special drink for diarrhoea can be made by using a packet of oral rehydration salts (ORS). This drink is used by doctors and health workers to treat dehydrated children. But it can also be used in the home to prevent dehydration.

○ Dissolve the contents of the packet in the amount of water indicated on the packet. If you use too little water, the drink could make the diarrhoea worse. If you use too much water, the drink will be less effective.

○ Stir well, and give to the child to drink in a cup or feed with a spoon.

2

A child with diarrhoea needs food.

- It is often said that a child with diarrhoea should not be given any food or drink while the diarrhoea lasts. This advice is wrong. Food can help to stop the diarrhoea. Also, diarrhoea can lead to serious malnutrition unless parents make a special effort to keep feeding the child during and after the illness.
- A child with diarrhoea usually has less appetite, so feeding may be difficult at first. But the child should be tempted to eat - as frequently as possible - by offering small amounts of his or her favourite foods.
- After the age of about six months, all children need extra food in addition to breastmilk. They should be given soft, well-mashed mixes of cereal and beans, or cereal and well-cooked meat or fish. Add one or two teaspoonfuls of oil to cereal and vegetable mixes if possible. Also good for the child are yoghurt and fruits. Foods should be freshly prepared and given to the child five or six times a day. This diet should be continued if the child has diarrhoea.

3

When a breastfed child has diarrhoea, it is important to continue breastfeeding.

- Mothers are sometimes advised to give less breastmilk if a child has diarrhoea. This is wrong advice. Breastfeeding should continue - and if possible the child should be fed more often.
- If the child is being fed on milk-powder solutions or cow's milk, then feeding should continue as usual.

4

A child who is recovering from diarrhoea needs an extra meal every day for at least two weeks.

- Extra feeding after the diarrhoea stops is vital for a full recovery. At this time, the child has more appetite and can eat an extra meal a day for at least a week. This will help the child to catch up on the food 'lost' while the child was ill and the appetite was low. A child is not fully recovered from diarrhoea until he or she is at least the same weight as when the illness began.

○ Breastfeeding more frequently than usual also helps to speed up recovery.

5

Trained help is needed if diarrhoea is more serious than usual, if it persists for more than two weeks, or if there is blood in the stool.

○ Parents should seek help from a health worker without delay if the child:

- has a fever
- is extremely thirsty
- will not eat or drink normally
- vomits frequently
- passes several watery stools in one or two hours
- passes blood in the stool (a sign of dysentery)
- if the diarrhoea persists for more than two weeks.

○ If a child has any of these signs, qualified medical help is needed quickly. The doctor or health worker will give the child a drink made with special oral rehydration salts (*see box*). In the meantime, keep trying to make the child drink liquids.

6

Medicines other than ORS should not be used for diarrhoea, except on medical advice.

○ Most medicines for diarrhoea are either useless or harmful. The diarrhoea will usually cure itself in a few days. The real danger is usually not the diarrhoea but malnutrition and the loss of liquids from the child's body.

○ Do not give a child tablets or other medicines for diarrhoea unless these have been prescribed by a trained health worker.

○ Antibiotics should be given - after seeking medical advice - if a child has diarrhoea with blood in the stool. Other drugs should not be used.

7

Diarrhoea can be prevented by breastfeeding, by immunizing all children against measles, by using latrines, by keeping food and water clean, and by washing hands before touching food.

○ Diarrhoea is caused by germs from faeces entering the mouth. These germs can be spread in water, in food, on hands, on eating and drinking utensils, by flies, and by dirt under fingernails. To prevent diarrhoea, the germs must be stopped from entering the child's mouth.

○ Poverty and lack of basic services such as clean drinking water mean that many families find it difficult to prevent diarrhoea. But the most effective ways are to:

- give breastmilk alone for about the first six months of a baby's life (breastmilk helps to protect babies against diarrhoea and other illnesses)
 - at the age of about six months, introduce clean, nutritious, well-mashed, semi-solid foods and continue to breastfeed
 - if a milk-powder solution or cow's milk has to be used, give it to the child from a cup rather than a bottle
 - use the cleanest water available for drinking (water from wells, springs or rivers should be brought to the boil and cooled before use)
 - always use latrines to dispose of faeces, and be sure to put children's faeces in a latrine immediately (or bury them). (Children's faeces are even more dangerous to health than those of adults)
 - wash hands with soap and water immediately after using the latrine and before preparing or eating food
 - cover food and drinking water to protect it from germs
 - if possible, food should be thoroughly cooked, and prepared just before eating. It should not be left standing, or it will collect germs
 - bury or burn all refuse to stop flies spreading disease.
- Measles frequently results in serious diarrhoea. Immunization against measles therefore also protects a child against this cause of diarrhoea. There is no vaccine to prevent ordinary diarrhoea.