

Abdominal pain in children

What is abdominal pain?

Abdominal pain is pain or cramping anywhere in the abdomen (sometimes called a tummy, belly or stomach ache). Children often complain of abdominal pain. It is one of the most common reasons children come to the emergency department.

Most cases of abdominal pain are not serious and children often get better by themselves.

What causes abdominal pain?

There are many things that can cause abdominal pain.

- Bowel (gut) problems – such as constipation or irritable bowel. Infections – such as gastroenteritis (which causes vomiting and diarrhoea/runny faeces or poo) or urine infections
- Food related – too much food, food poisoning or food allergies and intolerances
- Surgical problems – such as appendicitis or a bowel obstruction
- Period pain – some girls can have monthly pain before or during their period

Treatment

Abdominal pain can be hard to diagnose. Often the cause is not apparent and the symptoms may take some time to become obvious.

Sometimes tests are needed. They may include:

- Blood tests
- A urine test
- A stool (faeces or poo) test
- Radiology tests such as an x-ray or ultrasound of the abdomen

Some results (such as urine or stool tests) may take a number of days to be completed in the laboratory. Your local doctor will receive a letter advising them how to obtain the test results, or a hospital appointment will be made for you to return to get the test results (in the emergency department review clinic).

Treatment may be as simple as going home to rest, drink fluids and eat a bland diet. At other times, your child may be admitted to hospital or may need an operation (surgery).

Home care

There are some general ways to ease your child's pain.

- Ensure your child gets plenty of rest
- Help your child drink plenty of clear fluids, such as water
- Getting your child to drink is most important as it prevents dehydration (loss of water)
- If your child is hungry let them eat what they want or offer bland food such as crackers, rice, bananas or toast. Do not force your child to eat if they feel unwell. They will start eating when they feel better. Rubbing a child's tummy or having a distraction, such as reading a book, can sometimes ease the pain.
- Give paracetamol if your child is in pain or is miserable. Carefully check the label for the correct dose and make sure you are not giving your child any other products containing paracetamol. Only give as directed. Do not give your child aspirin.

What to expect

Many children with abdominal pain get better quickly, without any treatment and often no cause can be found.

Sometimes the cause becomes more obvious with time and treatment can be started. This is why it is important to see your local doctor for follow-up and to return to the Cabrini ED if symptoms return or get worse.

Repeated attacks of abdominal pain

Some children have repeated attacks of abdominal pain, which can be very worrying for parents. Often no health problem can be found. Children may have abdominal 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, kindergarten or with friends. See your local doctor for advice. A referral may be needed to a paediatrician (a doctor who specialises in children) or gastroenterologist (a doctor who specialises in tummy problems).

Follow-up

If pain or other problems persist for more than 24 hours, return to Cabrini ED.

Seeking help

Cabrini Emergency Department (ED) is staffed by experienced emergency doctors and nurses 24 hours a day, 7 days per week. If you have any questions about your ED treatment our qualified ED staff can be contacted on **(03) 9508 1500** at any time. If you need to return to Cabrini ED for ongoing care we would be glad to take care of you again and if this occurs within a week of your initial consultation the doctor's fee will be bulk-billed.

You can also expect to receive a phone call or SMS message from one of our emergency nurses the day after you have been discharged. The nurse will be able to clarify any aspect of your diagnosis, treatment, or follow-up.

In a medical emergency return to Cabrini ED if it is safe to do so or go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

Seek urgent medical care if your child:

- Has severe pain (despite pain medication) or the pain has moved
- Has a fever (temperature over 38°C)
- Is pale, sweaty and unwell
- Is refusing to drink fluids
- Is vomiting for more than 24 hours and not keeping fluids down
- Their vomit is green in colour
- Has blood in their vomit or faeces (poo)
- Has problems passing urine or not done a wee (less than four wet nappies a day)
- Has pain or lumps in their groin
- Has a skin rash which is sore or painful

Want to know more?

- Contact Cabrini ED on **(03) 9508 1500**
- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional
- Visit the Royal Children's Hospital website www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au