Dehydration, Infants and Children

Dehydration is the loss of water and important blood salts from the body. Vital organs like the kidneys, brain, and heart cannot function without a proper amount of water and salt. Severe vomiting, diarrhea, and occasionally excessive sweating, can cause dehydration.

Since infants and children lose electrolytes and water with dehydration, they need oral rehydration with fluids that have the right amount electrolytes ("salts") and sugar. The sugar is needed for two reasons; to give calories and most importantly to help transport sodium (an electrolyte) across the bowel wall into the blood stream. There are many commercial rehydration solutions on the market for this purpose. Ask your pharmacist about the rehydration solution you wish to buy.

TREATING INFANTS:

Infants not only need fluids from an oral rehydration solution but will also need calories and nutrition from formula or breast milk. Oral rehydration solutions will not provide enough calories for infants. It is important that they receive formula or breast milk. Doctors do not recommend diluting formula during rehydration.

TREATING CHILDREN:

Children may not agree to drink an oral rehydration solution. The parents may have to use sport drinks. Unfortunately, this is not ideal, but is better than fruit juices. For toddlers and children, additional calories and nutritional needs can be met by giving an age-appropriate diet. This includes complex carbohydrates, meats, yogurts, fruits, and vegetables. For adults, they are treated the same as children. When a child or an adult vomits or has diarrhea, 4 to 8 ounces of ORS can be given to replace the estimated loss.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- Your child has decreased urination.
- Your child has a dry mouth, tongue or lips.
- You notice decreased tears or sunken eyes.
- Your child has dry skin.
- Your child is breathing fast.
- Your child is increasingly fussy or floppy.
- Your child is pale or has poor color.
- The fingertip takes more than 2 seconds to turn pink again after a gentle squeeze.
- There is blood in the vomit or stool.
- Your child's abdomen is very tender or enlarged.
- There is persistent vomiting or severe diarrhea.
- Your child is not acting right or has a change in behavior.

MAKE SURE YOU:

- Understand these instructions.
- Will watch your condition.
- Will get help right away if you are not doing well or get worse.

Some of this information is courtesy of the Center for Disease Control and Prevention of Food Illness Fact Sheet.

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