

Stomach upset: Remedy at home or see a doctor?

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Online Desk: Stomach upset is a common phenomenon. It is a discomfort felt in the upper part of the abdomen. It encompasses a range of symptoms, including bloating or a feeling of fullness or tightness in the belly, usually due to the accumulation of too much gas. Patients often complain about abdominal pain and nausea. Vomiting is less common, and so is diarrhoea or constipation.

Stomach upset can be caused by viruses. The infection can lead to inflammation in the lining of our gastrointestinal tract, producing the characteristic features of the condition. It is usually not life-threatening. Simple home remedies can alleviate many symptoms; the upset stomach improves within a week. But on occasions, medical help is needed.

At-home management starts with dietary changes. Following a liquid diet for the first 2-3 days is recommended. Another special diet, the BRAT diet, has also become quite popular, especially for kids. This consists of bananas, rice, applesauce, and toast. It has been suggested that the BRAT diet can soothe the stomach and reduce nausea and diarrhoea. If the patient is vomiting, it is a good idea to wait 5-6 hours and then start with a small amount of these foods.

Keeping ourselves hydrated is critical. Vomiting and diarrhoea can rapidly deplete the water content of our body, resulting in dehydration. The goal is to drink adequate water. How do we measure it is adequate? We are drinking enough as long as our urine is clear or a pale yellow. As a rule of thumb, adults usually require eight or more cups of water daily. There are other fluids we can take water, e.g., non-caffeinated soda, ginger drink, diluted juices, etc.

If the patient is doing good with the fluids, it is time to restart solid food. This food should be bland, e.g., without spice or have just a little. Plain rice and bananas are good choices. It is advisable to have solids as smaller portions spread throughout the day. Ensure a high fibre content, e.g., fruits and vegetables.

Certain elements are better to avoid until the stomach is healthy again. Dairy products, i.e., cheese, milk, and ice-creams, fall into this category. So are greasy, spicy or fatty foods, raw vegetables, caffeine and whole grains.

But when should we see a doctor? Sometimes, it may indicate some underlying danger, and medical experts must be consulted. Most patients with stomach upset experience pain, but it usually subsides within a day. If the pain excruciates or continues beyond two days, medical help must be sought.

Black/tarry stool, stoppage of urination for 8 hours or more, blood in vomit, unexplained weight loss, and ongoing diarrhoea for five days or more are all alarming signs. A high fever of 101 degrees F also calls for medical attention, especially when it is not subsiding with over-the-counter medications like paracetamol. Difficulty swallowing, breathing difficulty, etc., are also indications of seriousness.

We can adopt healthy lifestyle practices to decrease the likelihood of stomach upset. Washing hands properly with soap and water is a general hygiene measure we should all follow. It is a must after using the bathroom and before and after eating. Sharing drinking and eating utensils is also non-advisable. Date-expired products should be avoided as far as possible. When travelling to a foreign country, be very cautious about the water and the food.

Sometimes, the symptoms of stomach upset are mild and resolve quickly. However, if this continues at regular intervals, it is better to check with the doctor. It may be due to certain allergies. If that is the case, we can always take appropriate steps to minimise the risk of upsetting the stomach.