

Gastro-oesophageal Reflux in Babies

Child Health Information

Gastro-Oesophageal Reflux (GOR) is when stomach contents, usually milk, come back up the oesophagus (food pipe).

It usually starts soon after birth, and usually goes away between 6 and 18 months of age. Reflux is a very common problem in babies.



Signs and Symptoms

- Frequent effortless vomiting, during or after feeds
- Frequent coughing/hiccups
- Swallowing or gulping after burping or feeding
- Back arching
- Unexplained pain/discomfort, particularly during or after feeding (although the most likely explanation for discomfort and irritability in babies under 3 months old is colic)

How can I help my baby?

- Most babies' symptoms will improve with very simple changes:
- Feeding your baby in an upright position and helping him/her to stay as upright as possible for as long as possible after a feed.
- Giving **smaller**, more frequent feeds, particularly bottle-fed babies. Whatever your baby takes at the moment, make the feeds smaller (even if that means feeding every 2 hours to begin with). Your health visitor can advise a suitable amount.
- Avoiding over-feeding large volumes (your health visitor can advise further).
- You can consider raising the head end of the cot to allow a slightly more upright sleeping position by putting something under the legs of the cot.
- Your baby should always sleep on their back with their feet at the bottom of the cot.

It is important to know that it is normal for all babies to bring up or vomit small amounts of milk. This may continue and will not cause any harm.

Will my baby need treatment?

If your baby is happy and growing well despite the vomiting, treatment is not usually needed. If however, after making the above changes for 2 weeks you have seen no improvement to your baby's symptoms then other treatments may help.

- Breast fed babies may be given a feed thickener such as Carobel[®]. This can be mixed with expressed breast milk (EBM) or water and given on a spoon immediately before breastfeeding.
- Bottle fed babies can either be given a thickener mixed with their formula or a pre-thickened formula milk, such as SMA Staydown[®] or Enfamil AR[®].
- Babies over 4-6 months may improve when they start some solid foods.
- Whichever treatment you choose allow about 2 weeks for it to begin to make an improvement. Many babies respond well to the above thickeners.
- Both Carobel[®] and the pre-thickened formula milks are available to buy over the counter, or on prescription.

If there is no change what happens next?

- Your doctor may prescribe Infant Gaviscon[®]. This is a thickener as well as a mild antacid. It should not be given with thickened milk or Carobel etc as it can become too thick in the stomach.
- If there is no improvement after about 2 more weeks your doctor may prescribe Ranitidine. Ranitidine reduces acid production in the stomach. It may take about 4 weeks to show a definite improvement.
- If your baby has other symptoms suggesting allergy such as eczema, your doctor or health visitor may suggest a 2 week trial of a low allergy milk eg Nutramigen[®] or Aptamil Pepti[®] or for breast feeding mums to try a milk-free diet. The RUH has a leaflet with details of how to do this. It is very important to retry normal milk after the trial to confirm if the diet change is needed longer term.
- If there are ongoing problems other medication such as Omeprazole may be prescribed.
- Reflux usually improves once your child is eating solids and is sitting and standing upright.

The aim of treatment is to have a happy growing baby. It will not always be possible to stop all the vomiting but it should reduce.

Further information

Your GP, hospital doctor or health visitor will be happy to give further advice.

Living with reflux is a charity with lots of information about reflux www.livingwithreflux.org/

NHS Choices -Birth to Five website has more general information about the care of babies and young children: www.nhs.uk/planners/birthtofive/