

Paediatric department

Babies with reflux

Reflux is when a baby brings up milk or is sick (vomits) during or shortly after feeding. Vomits can range from small to quite large, and contain milk. Reflux can make babies very uncomfortable and signs of discomfort babies commonly show are screaming and back-arching. Reflux can be quite concerning for parents, but it's very common and usually gets better on its own.

Reflux usually starts before a baby is eight weeks old, improves by six months, and has usually stopped by the time a baby is one year old. This happens more frequently with babies than older children because the muscle at the top of the stomach in younger babies is immature and allows milk or sick to pass back through, especially when the baby lies down.

What are the symptoms of reflux in babies?

- 'Bringing up' milk or being sick during or shortly after feeding
- Coughing or hiccupping when feeding
- Being unsettled during feeding
- Swallowing or gulping after burping or feeding
- Crying and not settling with usual parental comfort
- Back-arching
- Drawing legs up to their tummy
- Not gaining weight
- Discomfort on lying flat.

Sometimes babies may have signs of reflux but will not bring up milk or be sick. This is often called 'silent reflux'.

Some symptoms of reflux can be similar to colic (crying a lot for no obvious reason e.g. for more than 3 hours a day, 3 days a week for at least a week). However, if your baby has most of the above symptoms it's much more likely that they have reflux.

What can you try at home that might help your baby?

- Ask a health visitor for advice and support
- Get advice about your baby's breastfeeding position or how to bottle feed your baby
- Hold your baby upright during feeding and for as long as possible after feeding
- Give formula-fed babies smaller feeds more often
- Make sure your baby sleeps flat on their back. They should not sleep on their side or front
- Ensure your baby is burped in the middle of a feed as well as at the end
- Change the teet and bottle for formula-fed babies to one which helps to reduce milk flow
- Ensure your baby is getting the right amount of milk for them, and they are not feeding too much as this can be a cause of vomiting. If your baby is formula-fed, please follow the advice on the packet and do ask your health visitor if you are unsure
- Consider early weaning. Weaning is not recommended until a baby is 18 weeks old. However, weaning at 18 weeks has been found to improve reflux symptoms in some children.

Contact your GP for advice if your baby...

- ➔ Is not improving after 2 weeks of trying these things at home to ease reflux
- ➔ Gets reflux for the first time after they're 6 months old
- ➔ Is older than 1 year and still has reflux
- ➔ Is not gaining weight or is losing weight (sometimes called "faltering growth")
- ➔ You are struggling to cope with your baby's symptoms, feel stressed or worn out or unable to cope.

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What medical treatment may help?

If these suggestions do not help, your GP may discuss medical treatment that might help your baby.

- **Gaviscon** is a medication which is sometimes used for reflux. This can be very tricky to give to breastfed babies and sometimes causes constipation. It works as a thickener to make milk less likely to reflux back up the food pipe.

You can find further details on Gaviscon via the below link:

https://www.medicinesforchildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/content-type/leaflet/pdf/20140530175403_0.pdf

- **Omeprazole** is another medication which your doctor may prescribe. It can take up to 2 weeks to work to improve symptoms. The dose of Omeprazole should be increased after discussion with your doctor as the child gains weight.

Further detail about Omeprazole is available here:

https://www.medicinesforchildren.org.uk/sites/default/files/content-type/leaflet/pdf/MfC_Omeprazole_for_GORD_PV2_2015-03-20.pdf

What else might my doctor suggest?

Sometimes reflux in babies can be caused by a cow's milk protein allergy. These children may show symptoms of reflux alongside dry patches of skin and a history of green poo or blood in the poo.

If you breastfeed your baby, you may be advised by your doctor to exclude dairy from your diet. A true dairy-free diet means strictly no dairy at all, and is not the same as a lactose-free diet. You will usually need to continue this for more than 3 weeks to see an effect. If you are breastfeeding and cut out dairy, please discuss this with your GP as Mums will need calcium and vitamin D supplements.

If your baby is formula-fed and your GP thinks that your baby could have a cow's milk protein allergy, they may be prescribed a trial of a different formula. These are only available on prescription from a doctor.

Babies who respond well to a cow's milk protein-free diet will need to see a dietitian who can help advise on the best strategy for weaning and later re-introducing milk back into their diet.

Are alternatives to cow's milk OK for my baby?

Some milk advertised for babies are not suitable – these include goat's milk formulas, soya formulas (under 6 months of age) and plant-based milk substitutes. Please seek advice from your health visitor if you are unsure.

Urgently call your GP or call NHS 111 if your baby

- ➔ Has sick that's green or yellow, or has blood in it
- ➔ Has blood in their poo
- ➔ Has a swollen or tender tummy
- ➔ Has a very high temperature or they feel hot or shivery. If your baby is under 3 months of age and has a fever over 38 degrees Celsius - or is 3-6 months of age with a fever above 39 degrees Celsius.
- ➔ Keeps being sick and there are concerns that they are not keeping any of their feeds down
- ➔ Has diarrhoea that lasts for over a week or has signs of dehydration such as reduced wet nappies, a dry mouth or sunken eyes
- ➔ Will not stop crying and is very distressed
- ➔ Is refusing to feed.

Further information

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/reflux-in-babies/>



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