

Preventing dehydration in unwell children

Dehydration is when your body gets too dry

Your body can get dehydrated from losing water and salts. In tamariki it is often caused by not eating or drinking when they are unwell, or having a fever, vomiting (being sick) or diarrhoea (runny poos). It can also happen when they are outside in very hot conditions. Young children and babies are more likely to become dehydrated than adults. Keeping your child hydrated is always important, but it is especially important when they are unwell.



Mild dehydration in healthy children usually isn't dangerous. But more severe dehydration can cause the body to shut down and can even become life-threatening.

Keep an eye out for signs of dehydration

If your child is **mildly dehydrated**, they may have:

- dizziness or light-headedness
- feeling sick (nausea) or headaches
- dark yellow or brown urine (wee) – urine should be pale yellow
- fewer wet nappies or nappies not as wet as usual; or older children will not go to the toilet as much
- dry lips, tongue, mouth or throat.

If your child is **severely dehydrated**, they may:

- be less active than usual or lethargic
- look pale and have sunken eyes
- not produce tears when they are crying
- breathe faster than usual and have a fast heart rate
- seem irritable, drowsy or confused.

If your child shows signs of severe dehydration, call your GP immediately or go to your closest hospital emergency department.

Offer your child plenty to drink

Babies

Carry on breastfeeding, or bottle feeding your pēpi/baby. You may need to feed them more often and drink extra liquid yourself if you are breastfeeding. Don't dilute baby formula, use it as usual. If your child is over 1 year old and you are giving them cow's milk, continue to do so.



Toddlers and older children

Keep giving your child drinks even if they say they're not thirsty, or if they vomit. They need to stay hydrated so they can get well. Water is the best thing for your tamariki/child to drink.

If your child is not drinking enough water, you can give them the following drinks. You need to mix them with water to dilute them as they contain lots of sugar which can make their dehydration worse.

Type of drink	How to dilute
Apple juice	Mix 1 part juice to 1 part water.
Cordial	Make up as normal, then mix 1 part cordial to 1 part water.
Fizzy drinks such as lemonade	Mix 1 part fizzy to 1 part warm water (warm water removes the bubbles).

Your healthcare provider may recommend electrolyte solutions such as Pedialyte, Gastrolyte or Electral, if your child is dehydrated. You can buy these from your pharmacist and they are available on prescription – follow the instructions on the packet.

Do not give your child these drinks

- Undiluted soft drinks, fruit juices, Lucozade, Ribena, sports drinks (eg, Powerade or Gatorade). These have too much sugar in them.
- Coffee and tea – these can make your child dehydrated.

Give your child small amounts to drink, often

Don't give your child a lot to drink at one time. A 1/4 cup every 15 minutes, or 1 teaspoon or 5 mLs in a syringe every minute is good. Children aged 1–3 years need about 4 cups of liquid each day, including water or milk. This amount increases to about 5 cups for 4–8-year-olds, and 7–8 cups for older children.

Keep offering food as well as drinks

Your child may not want to eat when they are unwell. That doesn't matter if they are drinking enough. Do offer them food, even if they have runny poos. Starchy, simple foods are best – try bread or toast, porridge, rice, potatoes, plain biscuits, yoghurt or milk pudding.

Don't give them fatty or sugary foods like takeaways, chippies, sweets, cakes, chocolate, ice cream, cream or coconut cream. These are hard to digest and can cause a tummy/puku upset.