

Reflux in infants

What is gastro-oesophageal reflux?

Reflux is where the food in the stomach overflows back into the oesophagus (gullet). It often causes a baby to bring up or vomit milk after a feed.

A mild degree of reflux is normal in babies, especially after they burp; this condition is called *possetting*. However, the reflux can be quite severe in some babies, who appear to vomit after their bottle or breastfeeding.

What are the symptoms?

Milk will flow freely from the mouth soon after feeding, even after the baby has been put down for a sleep. Sometimes the flow will be forceful and may even be out of the nose.

Despite this vomiting or regurgitation, the babies usually are comfortable and thrive. Some infants will cry, presumably because of heartburn.

What is the outlook?

Reflux gradually improves with time and usually ceases soon after solids are introduced into the diet. Most cases clear up completely by the age of 10 or 12 months, when the baby is sitting. Severe cases tend to persist until 18 months of age.

Contact your doctor should any unusual symptoms appear (such as green or blood-stained vomit or projectile vomiting), or if your baby is distressed after feeds or stops putting on weight.

What is the treatment?

Simple home measures

The baby's stomach can empty more quickly if you elevate the head of the cot by about 10 to 20 degrees and place the baby on his or her left side for sleeping. Also, you could place the child upright in a suspended 'swing' for periods of about 30 to 60 minutes after feeds when awake. The old 'bucket' method, in which the child is placed in a bucket, is not necessary.

Feeding

It is better to give small feeds quite often rather than large infrequent feeds. It is best to avoid fatty and spicy foods in older children.

Thickening of feeds

Giving the baby thicker feeds usually helps those with more severe reflux. Parents can add a thickener to existing feeds or use a pre-thickened formula. The old-fashioned remedy of using cornflour blended with milk in bottles is still useful.

Bottle-fed babies (powdered milk formula)

Carobel: Add slightly less than 1 full scoop per bottle.

Gaviscon: Mix slightly less than half a teaspoon of Infant Gaviscon Powder with 120 mL of formula in the bottle.

Cornflour: Mix 1 teaspoon with each 120 mL of formula. Check with your doctor or nurse for the proper method.

Karicare: This formulation is easy to use but is more expensive. Give according to the manufacturer's instructions.

S 26 AR

and

Enfalac AR: Other commercial thickening formulas.

Breastfed babies

Carobel: Add slightly less than 1 full scoop to 20 mL cool boiled water or 20 mL expressed breast milk and give just before the feed.

Gaviscon: Mix slightly less than 1/2 teaspoon of Infant Gaviscon Powder with 20 mL cool boiled water or expressed breast milk and give just after the feed.

Key points

Reflux:

- is common
- improves with age
- usually clears up by 10 to 12 months of age
- is helped by elevating the cot
- is helped by thickening the feeds
- is helped by frequent small feeds
- is helped by propping up the baby after feeds.