

Greenwich Hospital

What is Gastro Esophageal Reflux?

PATIENT/FAMILY INFORMATION SHEET

What is Gastro Esophageal Reflux?

Gastro esophageal reflux is a condition in which stomach contents, food and stomach juices, frequently flow back into the esophagus (the tube between the mouth and the stomach). Normally a muscle in the esophagus called the esophageal sphincter opens to allow food to pass into the stomach and closes to prevent food and stomach juices from flowing back into the esophagus.

When a baby has reflux, the esophageal sphincter is weak or relaxes allowing the stomach contents to flow up into the esophagus. This stomach contents has a high acid level. Sometimes the contents flow all the way back up to the mouth causing the baby to spit up. Most babies outgrow reflux by 12 months of age.

What are the symptoms of reflux?

Infants with reflux may have one or more of the following symptoms:

- Wet burps/hiccup sounds
- Frequent spitting up or vomiting
- Irritability, constant or sudden crying, “colic” crying (due to pain and or irritation)
- Poor sleep habits with frequent waking
- Fussiness or crying around feeding time
- Bad breath

Other less common symptoms associated with reflux include:

- Excessive drooling
- Swallowing problems including gagging and choking
- Respiratory problems such as wheezing, apnea (no breathing for more than 20 seconds), pneumonia
- Poor weight gain
- Slow growth

How will the doctor know if my baby has reflux?

- The doctor will take a medical history and do a physical exam, assessing the baby’s symptoms
- A consult may be made to a pediatric gastroenterologist
- The following diagnostic tests may be ordered:
 - A 12-hour pH-probe study. During this test, a very flexible tube is placed in the baby’s esophagus with its tip just above the

stomach. The probe is connected to a recording device which monitors the acid level in the esophagus, and shows precisely when the reflux episodes occur

- A Barium Swallow study. This is a series of x-rays taken after the baby is fed with a small amount of chalky liquid called Barium.

How is reflux in babies treated?

Breast milk is recommended for babies with reflux because it is more hypoallergenic than formula.

Medications may be prescribed by your baby's doctor which help to:

- Decrease the acidity in the stomach
- Improve the stomach emptying
- Improve the muscle coordination

The doctor may also recommend that you do the following:

- Keep your baby upright during and for 30 minutes after feeding
- Prop your baby up when sleeping (your baby's nurse will show you how to do this)
- Feed small amounts, more frequently
- Thicken baby's breast or and formula with baby cereal per your doctor's instructions
- Burp your baby frequently (after every ½ to one ounce) during feedings
- Provide a pacifier. Sucking on a pacifier can help to increase the production of saliva, which will help to neutralize acidic stomach contents.

Sources: Nemour's Foundation. Retrieved March 2006 from www.kidshealth.org
Neonatology on the Web. Retrieved March 2006 from www.neonatology.org
American Academy of Pediatrics. Retrieved March 2006 from <http://www.aap.org>

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