What medicine is there to treat food poisoning? [1]

Dear Alice,

What medicine should we take for food poisoning?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Often times the best medicine for food poisoning is rest and plenty of fluids. However some food poisoning can be severe or dangerous, and requires the attention of a health care provider. Food poisoning is usually caused by bacteria, which in turn cause vomiting and/or diarrhea. Other culprits may include bacterial toxins, viruses, parasites, poisonous mushrooms, other natural poisons, and other harmful chemicals. Mild food poisoning can be cared for at home while the illness runs its course, usually about a few days (though some types of food poisoning may take longer to resolve).

When someone has food poisoning, rest and drinking plenty of fluids, rather than medication, is the prescription. Taking small, frequent sips of clear liquids helps prevent dehydration. Oral rehydration solutions containing electrolytes that replenish what the body loses through vomiting and diarrhea are sometimes suggested. If only sports drinks are available, dilute them with water since the sugar in these drinks can worsen diarrhea.

In addition, health care providers usually discourage people from using medication to prevent and/or stop the vomiting or diarrhea. Although unpleasant, the body's natural response of ridding itself of the virus or bacteria that causes symptoms is effective. Since food poisoning usually simply needs to run its course, food poisoning caused by bacteria typically doesn't require antibiotics.

Individuals who are at high risk for dehydration or have underdeveloped or weakened immune systems (babies, young children, older adults, and people with severe or chronic health conditions, i.e., HIV/AIDS, cancer and chemotherapy, or kidney disease), should consult with their health care provider if they think they have food poisoning.

Also, a health care provider needs to be contacted immediately when a person:

- Has a fever of over 101.5 degrees Fahrenheit
- Has severe diarrhea for more than three days
- Vomits to the point that s/he cannot keep anything down
- Has serious abdominal cramping
- Has bloody stool
- Has symptoms of dehydration: dry mouth or sticky saliva, does not urinate or dark urine, dizziness, and/or, lightheadedness
- Is confused
- Muscle weakness
- Difficulty speaking
- Double vision

Potentially fatal, botulism, which is food poisoning produced by certain spores in food, is especially common in insufficiently sterilized or badly sealed home-canned goods. Symptoms show up usually between 18 and 36 hours after eating contaminated food and may include headache, blurred vision, muscle weakness, nausea, vomiting, constipation, urinary retention, reduced salivation, and/or eventual paralysis.

So, back to your question: for mild food poisoning, medication is unnecessary. However, those who experience serious symptoms would benefit from immediate medical attention.

Alice!

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- Stomach & Other Gastrointestinal Grumblings

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