

# Diaper rash

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## What is it?

Any rash in the skin area covered by the diaper is considered a diaper rash. These rashes are unique in that they don't occur in children who no longer wear diapers.

## What causes it?

Almost every child gets diaper rash at one time or another. Most of them are due to prolonged contact with moisture, bacteria and human waste products. This leads to *irritant contact dermatitis* or *diaper dermatitis*. The skin irritants are made by the action of bacteria from bowel movements on certain chemicals in the urine. The rash is often made worse due to the friction of the diaper rubbing against the infant's legs and the softening of the skin from prolonged wet diaper contact.

Another common cause of diaper rash is a yeast infection called *Candida*. This is the same yeast that causes thrush and vaginal yeast infections.

## Who gets it?

As previously mentioned, almost all children get diaper rash at some point in their life. Diarrhea can often increase the chance of getting a rash due to frequent stooling. Diaper rashes occur equally with cloth and disposable diapers.

## What are the symptoms?

The skin of the diaper area may become red and scaly, occasionally with pimples, small bubbles, and cracks. The rash can be patchy or in one single area, but the groin folds are often spared. It can spread to the stomach area.

If the rash becomes bright red and raw, covers a large area, and is surrounded by red dots this is likely a yeast infection. It is possible that your infant had a contact dermatitis which was then infected with yeast.

## Warning symptoms

Contact your doctor if your child should have any of the following serious symptoms.

- The diaper rash occurs in the first six weeks of life
- Pimples, small ulcers, or blisters form
- Your baby has a fever
- Your baby loses weight
- Large bumps or nodules appear
- The rash spreads to other areas, such as the arms, face and scalp
- The rash doesn't get better after trying the tips on treating diaper rash for one week

## How do you prevent it?

The key to prevention is keeping the area dry and clean so that the skin does not become irritated with the infant's waste and the yeast is not allowed to grow. Your infant probably should be changed every 2 - 3 hours during the day and immediately after waking up in the morning. Don't use wipes that contain alcohol or perfume. Make sure that your baby's bottom is completely dry before closing up a fresh diaper. Keep the diaper loose enough to let air reach the skin inside the diaper.

If you use cloth diapers and wash them yourself, you will need to use bleach (such as Clorox, Borax, or Purex) to sterilize them. During the regular cycle, use any detergent. Then refill the washer with warm water, add 1 cup of bleach, and run a second cycle.

## Can it be treated?

Most diaper rashes are cured easily with simple treatment. The key to preventing and treating diaper rash is to keep your baby's diaper area clean, cool and dry.

Cloth diapers washed by a diaper service are less likely to cause diaper rash than those washed at home. This may be because diaper services use hotter water, which kills all germs and removes chemicals that can irritate your baby's skin. Boiling diapers for 15 minutes on the stove after washing them is one way to do this yourself.

Some disposable diapers have an extra-absorbent gelling material that seems to help keep the skin dry. Using this type of diaper may help prevent diaper rash in some babies.

- **Changing diapers** frequently is the most important measure. You should check diapers about every hour, and if they are wet or soiled, change them immediately. If the rash is severe, you may have to wake you baby up during the night to change the diaper.

- **Rinsing the skin** with warm water alone will help remove the urine and stool without damaging the skin with the drying effects of soap. Use mild soap only after bowel movements. After using soap, rinse well. If the diaper rash is quite raw, use warm water soaks for 15 minutes 3 times a day.

- **Increased air exposure** is also helpful. Leave your baby's bottom exposed to the air as much as possible each day. Practical times are during naps or after bowel movements. Put a towel or diaper under your baby. When the diaper is on, fasten it loosely so the air can circulate between it and the skin.

- **Night time care** should include the use of the new disposable diapers that are made with materials that lock wetness inside the diaper and away from the skin. Avoid plastic pants at night. Until the rash is better, awaken once during the night to change your baby's diaper.

- **Creams and powders** often aren't necessary, but occasionally can be helpful. If your baby's skin is dry and cracked apply an ointment to protect the skin after washing off each bowel movement. A barrier ointment is also needed when your child has diarrhea. Use zinc oxide ointment (Balmex, Caldesene or Desitin) or petrolatum (A & D, Vaseline) to protect your baby's skin

from moisture. Avoid talcum powder because of the risk of pneumonia if your baby inhales the powder. Also don't use creams that contain boric acid, camphor, phenol, methyl salicylate or compound of benzoin tincture. These things can be harmful.

- **Antifungal creams** are very helpful in the treatment of *Candida* diaper rash. Initially you should get a prescription from your doctor for the antifungal cream. If your infant has recurrent *Candida* diaper rash, your doctor may suggest that you buy the antifungal cream over-the-counter.

- **Topical hydrocortisone ointment** after each diaper change for a limited time is often effective for resistant cases. Prior to starting such therapy, however, the possibility of a *Candida* infection should be excluded by your doctor. Hydrocortisone can worsen a *Candida* diaper rash. You should not use steroid creams from other prescriptions on your infant's diaper area unless advised to do so by your doctor.

## Are there complications?

The vast majority of diaper rash heals well on its own without any long lasting consequences. There are a few rare conditions which may persist or be resistant to simple therapeutic measures mentioned above. Usually there are large blisters or pussy drainage associated with these conditions. You should contact your doctor if your infant develops fever sores, boils, seems sicker, loses weight, isn't eating well or does not improve as expected.

### In summary

- Most diaper rash is caused by urine and stool irritating baby's delicate skin.
- Frequent diaper changes are the key to treatment.
- Some diaper rash is caused by *Candida* yeast. This requires an antifungal cream.
- Follow the treatment schedule prescribed. If the rash has not improved in 3 days, call your doctor.
- For more information, contact the American Academy of Family Physicians at [familydoctor.org](http://familydoctor.org) or the National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families at [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)