

“My Stomach Hurts”: Why Some Kids Get Stomachaches Before School

By Julie Rawe

At a Glance

- **Stress is a common cause of stomachaches and vomiting in kids.**

- **When kids stay home because of tummy trouble, they may be avoiding certain aspects of school.**

- **Even if it seems like your child is “faking” a stomachache, something real is happening that needs to be addressed.**

For many families, it’s a common part of the morning routine. Your child says, “My stomach hurts.” And then you have to make a decision: Will your child stay home or go to school despite these tummy troubles?

Many kids have frequent stomachaches. Some kids may even throw up before school. The cause can be physical, like constipation or lactose intolerance. But stomachaches can also be caused by stress. Learn more about why some kids get stomachaches before school.

Stomachaches and Stress

Stress can cause abdominal pain. This is true for kids and for adults. And even though the thoughts in our heads may trigger the aches in our bellies, the pain is still very real.

You may hear doctors call this kind of stomachache *psychosomatic*. This word is used when psychological factors like stress fuel a physical condition. (Migraines are another example. This kind of headache is very real and is often caused or triggered by stress.)

Stress can also affect our tolerance for pain. The same gas bubble that might not bother us when we're happy and well-rested may feel a lot worse when we're tired and stressed.

Vomiting without a fever could also be a sign of stress. Talk with your child's doctor if your child is throwing up and you've ruled out medical reasons like motion sickness or a virus.

Stomachaches and Avoiding School

If kids are struggling in school, they may say their stomach hurts in the morning before class. Or you might find out later in the day that your child spent some time in the school nurse's office because of stomach pain. Either of these could

be signs that your child is trying to avoid certain aspects of school.

Is your child having trouble academically? Socially? Either or both of these could be connected to your child's tummy troubles.

Keep a diary to help you look for patterns. For example, does your child's stomach hurt on days when there's a math test? On days with PE class? Does your child tend to throw up in the morning before school?

Be sure to include what foods your child ate before feeling ill and how recently your child went to the bathroom.

You can also use an anxiety log to better understand when and why your child feels anxious or stressed. These details can help you talk with your child's teacher or doctor about what might be causing the stomachaches.

How to Talk With Your Child About Stomachaches

Even if you think your child might be "faking" a stomachache, something real is happening that needs to be addressed. It might be that your child is having trouble with reading or other difficulties with schoolwork. Or maybe your child is experiencing social anxiety. There's also a chance that your child is being bullied.

Try to speak to your child with empathy. Reassure your child that you and the other caring adults in your child's life can help solve whatever the problem is.

It's also important to talk about the snowball effect. Staying home might seem like a good idea in the short term, but help your child understand why missing school today can make it harder to catch up tomorrow. (Here are suggestions for how to

respond when kids say they don't want to go to school.)

Talk about practical stuff like having to do homework after missing the teacher's lesson about it. Talk about anxiety, too. Anxiety is different from stress. But ongoing stress can lead to anxiety.

Explain how avoiding school today can make your child more anxious about going back tomorrow. Humans are hardwired to want to feel relief from stress and anxiety. The more we avoid something like school, the more our brains misinterpret that thing as a physical threat.

Keep in mind that throwing up may heighten kids' anxiety about going to school. For example, they may worry they'll throw up in front of their classmates. Some kids may even develop a fear of throwing up (emetophobia).

Talk with your child about ways to help manage stress and anxiety. For example, you might want to explore meditation apps for kids. Work together to come up with rules about when your child can stay home. Talking openly can empower your child to help come up with solutions.

Key Takeaways

- **Keep a diary to look for patterns in your child's stomachaches.**
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- **Talk openly with your child about what's happening at school and socially.**

- **Work with your child's doctor and teachers to figure out what's causing your child's stomach pain.**
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