

## REFLUX

All babies have reflux. “Reflux” just means that milk is moving upward from the stomach toward the mouth, and every baby spits up sometimes. Some spit up more than others, but even when it seems like it should be a problem, it is usually just a normal part of being a baby.

The babies who spit up the most are usually the ones who eat the most and gain the most weight, and spitting up is due to simply drinking more than they can hold. These are usually breastfed babies whose mothers have a lot of milk that flows quickly, and there is really no way to control that. Not only that, but breastfeeding is comforting, and some babies have a hard time stopping. After all, why stop a good thing? When babies drink too much, their stomachs stretch like overfilled balloons, and spitting up becomes a way to relieve the extra pressure.

Spitting up rarely affect growth, even when it looks like a tremendous amount of milk is spewing out. It is very difficult to look at a puddle of regurgitated milk and estimate how much is there, and when parents say that “everything is coming back up”, it is usually just a small fraction of the total amount.

When parents worry about “reflux”, the first thing I do is look at the growth chart; more often than not, it will show that the baby is actually gaining weight faster than we might expect. There is no way to stop this sort of regurgitation. The textbooks talk about adding rice cereal to bottle to thicken the milk, but this is impractical for breastfed babies. The best treatment is to simply change your mindset; if you accept the fact that excessive spitting up is usually a sign of getting a lot of milk, then the milk stains on your clothes actually become funny, rather than worrisome!

So if every baby has some reflux, when does it become abnormal? This is the real heart of the matter: the difference between “reflux” and “reflux disease”. In short, it becomes abnormal when it starts causing problems. Yes, wearing sour milk all day long is a problem for the parents, but I am really talking about problems for the baby, like poor growth and pain.

True reflux pain is the result of acid irritating the inside of the esophagus. Stomach acid does not have to actually come all the way up for this to happen. In fact, the pain of reflux is typically not as bad in babies who spit up the most. This goes against what people often think, but let’s think about it: milk neutralizes stomach acid, and the more milk a baby has in the stomach, the less painful it should be. Most babies who spit up a lot do not appear to be in pain at all, and the few who are fussy tend to be the fussiest before they actually spit up (when the pressure is the highest). Spitting up relieves the pressure and usually makes the pain get better. By contrast, the babies who have true reflux pain are the ones who regurgitate fairly small amounts between feeds rather than

soon after feeding, and these small amounts usually do not come all the way up. In fact, the babies with the worst reflux pain often do not spit up at all. They just cry a lot!

One important point to remember is that most fussiness is not due to reflux. In fact, one could even say that gastroesophageal reflux disease is both over-diagnosed and over-treated. Fussiness and spitting up are both extremely common, and it is very tempting to link the two, but most fussy babies are just plain normal. Things usually get better as they get older and as their intestines become more efficient. In spite of what the Internet says, arching can be a sign of both generalized abdominal pain and frustration, not just reflux. I think a lot of parents secretly hope that their fussy babies have reflux disease, because then it might be treatable. With no diagnosis, you just have to wait it out!

Fussiness and gassiness are just part of being a baby. The process of digesting milk simply creates a lot of gas. Young intestines not very good at moving the gas through, and to top it off, most babies have very little experience dealing with even minor pain.

Gassy babies usually turn to the most comforting thing they know: nursing. Most nursing mothers usually turn to the one thing they know will usually comfort their babies: nursing. More milk means more gas, which means more fussiness. Crying also leads to swallowed air, which leads to more stomach pain and more nursing. Then there is the whole issue of overstimulation, which also leads to crying (and swallowed air). The vicious cycle goes around and around. Sometimes, you just have to work through it and wait for things to get better in a few weeks! Weeks? Aaaah!

Reflux medicines do not prevent spitting up; they simply turn off the acid. If fussiness is due to acid irritating the esophagus, things will improve, and it is often worth a try. Unfortunately, there is not a good test to differentiate between reflux pain and gas pain, so we often resort to a trial-and-error plan. However, if things do not improve quickly, there is really no point in continuing medicines.

Nobody wants their baby to be in pain. Unfortunately, desperation often makes parents try desperate tactics, like eliminating foods from the nursing mother's diet. Again, in spite of what the Internet says, it rarely works. It usually leads to frustration and resentment, so I usually try to steer mothers away from doing that unless they can tell that a specific food causes pain.

There is so much more to say about reflux, but there is no way to discuss it all here. This is just the tip of the iceberg, and I have not even mentioned the nighttime coughing and eating problems that can be caused by reflux disease later in toddlerhood. If you have any questions about spitting up, reflux, or even about how to handle caring for a fussy baby, feel free to talk with your pediatrician any time.