Abdominal pain in babies

Introduction

Abdominal pain in babies is a common complaint for which parents seek medical advice at the pharmacy. Almost all babies experience pain in the abdomen at one point or another. Most of the time, it is self-limiting and is not caused by a serious medical problem. Although many different conditions cause abdominal pain in babies, it is important to identify the need for referral to the doctor for further investigation.

Presentation

Since infants are unable to describe their pain, the following are signs of a painful stomach:

- An increase in fussiness and crying
- Drawing up their legs toward the chest
- Poor eating.

Other symptoms are associated with abdominal pain, such as vomiting and diarrhoea (usually defined as three or more watery stools in a day) or fever. It is important to ensure that infants do not lose too much fluid in cases of diarrhoea or vomiting with abdominal pain.

management

The management of abdominal pain depends on the cause of the pain. Some specific causes of abdominal pain in infants include infantile colic (gripe), gastroenteritis, constipation, and food allergies or intolerances.

Infantile colic (gripe)

Colic usually occurs in infants between the ages of 10 days and three months. While the exact cause is unknown, colic seems to produce rapid and severe contractions of the intestine that are probably responsible for the baby’s pain. Often, the discomfort is more severe in the late afternoon and early evening. The baby’s face becomes red and his or her discomfort is accompanied by inconsolable crying, pulling up their legs towards the chest, the frequent passage of gas and general irritability. Various approaches to relieving colic include rocking the baby, walking with him or her in a baby carrier, swaddling him or her in a blanket, and allowing the baby to use a pacifier. Various over-the-counter products are available which can also be considered. Examples are Telament® Paediatric Colic Drops or Woodward’s® Gripe Water.

Gastroenteritis

Gastroenteritis is inflammation of the stomach and intestines. The most common cause is a viral or bacterial infection. The illness usually lasts for 3-5 days. The two most common
symptoms are diarrhoea and vomiting. Fever and abdominal pain are also associated with this infection. Rotavirus is the leading cause of gastroenteritis in babies. Although most cases of gastroenteritis are mild, and usually pass within 3-5 days, babies are at high risk of dehydration, so it is most important to ensure that they are adequately hydrated. Parents are advised to continue the baby’s usual feeding routine to help to prevent dehydration.

Rotavirus infection is a preventable disease, and babies should be vaccinated against rotavirus. This also provides protection against rotavirus infection throughout childhood.

Other possible causes of abdominal pain in babies include constipation, food allergies or intolerances.

When to refer

Referral to the doctor is necessary in the following circumstances:

- A temperature of 38°C or higher in children aged ≤ 3 months, or a temperature of 39°C or higher in children aged > 3 months
- Shortness of breath or abnormally rapid breathing
- Swelling in the soft part of the baby’s head (fontanelle)
- Blood or mucus in the stools (faeces)
- Swelling of the stomach
- Prolonged vomiting
- Prolonged diarrhoea

Conclusion

Abdominal pain is a common difficulty in babies. Although it is difficult to determine when a baby is experiencing abdominal pain, excessive fussiness is a clue. Most episodes of abdominal pain are self-limiting and resolve with no or minimal intervention. However, it is important to identify when referral to a doctor is necessary.

Bibliography

6. MIMS guide to OTC products; 2013.

“Other possible causes of abdominal pain in babies include constipation, food allergies or intolerances.”