

Script – Print – Trust your gut when it comes to your children's tummy aches

It's summertime. Now that kids are off school for a few months, there's sure to be plenty of changes in their routines including their eating habits. Fast food, candy and fair food can all contribute to tummy aches.

Stomachaches are quite common in young children. It can be something simple that comes and goes quickly or it could be something more severe.

According to a national poll conducted by C.S. Mott Children's Hospital at the University of Michigan Health, one in six parents say their child complains of a belly ache at least once a month.

"There are so many different reasons that a child could complain of a stomachache," says Alissa Bartel, a nurse practitioner with OSF HealthCare. "It could be something easy, like constipation or something they ate, food allergies or indigestion. They could have come across a virus at school or on a play date or even in their own home."

Stomach pain, however, could also mean more serious problems, such as appendicitis, bowel obstructions, urinary tract infections or even hernias.

"If your child is someone who does not complain about things, and they're complaining about a very bad pain that's bringing them to tears, that serious," Bartel says. "A fever is another serious symptom, and swelling of the belly can also indicate something more serious."

But the issue may not be physical; it can also be related to stress or anxiety. Bartel says that if parents notice a pattern every time that they're getting ready to go somewhere, for example, whether it be school or an activity and it turns into a recurrent tummy ache, that's a sign that it may be anxiety related.

Bartel says parents can help their children develop coping skills and change their routine. Most children will eventually outgrow a nervous stomach.

"It's really about looking at patterns, knowing our kids and paying attention to the signs they give us," she says.

Fortunately, there are ways to help our children overcome their tummy aches. If it's food allergies, finding those trigger foods can bring relief. If it's constipation, changing their diet or medications can help. And if it's anxiety or nerves, Bartel says parents can help their little ones to relax by talking with them, teaching them breathing exercises or distracting them with activities they enjoy such as a game, movie or book.

Bartel says the best advice she can give any parent when it comes to tummy aches is to trust your own gut.

"If you think that something is wrong with your child, take them in to be evaluated immediately," she says. "There is never anything wrong with erring on the side of caution."

If your child experiences severe pain, fatigue, trouble breathing, dehydration or blood in vomit along with stomach pain, call 911 immediately or take your child to the emergency department.