

Gastroenteritis

Information Sheet

What is it?

Gastroenteritis is a general term for an illness triggered by the infection and inflammation of the digestive system (gut). There are many causes of gastroenteritis, including viruses (e.g. *Norovirus*, *Rotavirus*, *Adenovirus*); bacteria (e.g. *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*); bacterial toxins (e.g. Staphylococcal food poisoning); parasites (e.g. *Giardia*, *Cryptosporidium*), chemicals and medications (e.g. some antibiotics). The exact cause of gastroenteritis can only be diagnosed by laboratory tests of faecal (poo) specimens.

What are the signs and symptoms of the illness?

Typical symptoms include diarrhoea and vomiting. Stomach cramps, fever and nausea ('feeling sick') may also be present.

- **What is Diarrhoea?**

Diarrhoea occurs when something upsets the normal process of your gut and so speeds up the whole digestive process. This makes you pass faeces (poo) more frequently than normal and the faeces are usually loose or watery in consistency. Normal bowel habits can vary with each person and this can be anything from 3 bowel movements per day to 3 per week. Normally, faeces should be solid but moist and easy to pass.

Diarrhoea usually lasts a day or two and usually comes on suddenly (acute attack). However, you can also have chronic diarrhoea, which lasts over a long period of time (2-3 weeks or months). Chronic diarrhoea may signal the presence of an underlying health problem and medical advice should be sought.

- **What is Vomiting?**

Vomiting ('throwing up') occurs when the brain receives certain information (e.g. food irritation or infection of the gut, motion from the inner ear) which causes the abdominal wall to contract and force out the contents of the stomach. Vomiting is usually harmless and often stops by itself.

Vomiting is more common in infants and children and can be triggered easily by overfeeding and motion as well as by gastroenteritis. Medical advice should be sought if someone is suffering from persistent vomiting or vomiting associated with a high fever or diarrhoea.

How bad is it?

Gastroenteritis is usually not serious and most people recover quickly. However, sometimes people are unable to drink enough fluids to replace those lost from vomiting and diarrhoea. These people can become dehydrated and may require special medical attention. This is especially important for children, the elderly or those suffering from weakened immune systems.

Medical attention should be sought as soon as possible if the ill person:

- Is a baby less than 6 months old

- Is not drinking
- Is not urinating ('passing wee') or passing less urine than usual
- Has dry lips and mouth and/or cold hands and feet
- Is unusually lethargic, drowsy or irritable
- Keeps vomiting or passing lots of diarrhoea
- Has blood or mucus in their faeces (poo)
- Has a high fever
- Has unexpected symptoms (e.g. pain when passing urine, headache, ongoing stomach pains, etc)
- Has other health problems
- Does not appear to be getting better

Care at Home

People with mild gastroenteritis can be looked after at home. The main treatment is to keep the sick person drinking plenty of fluids. Oral rehydration drinks (available from your chemist) are especially formulated to replace lost fluid rapidly. Make up the drink according to manufacturers instructions. Give small amounts frequently. Clear fluids such as fruit juice, cordial or soft drink may be used but must be diluted as they can make the diarrhoea worse. Breast-fed children should be fed on demand or at least every 2 hours. In between feeds, offer oral rehydration drinks or water. Bottle-fed infants should be given oral rehydration drinks instead of formula for the first 24 hours, and then given normal formula in small but frequent amounts.

Offer easily digested foods (e.g. bread, plain biscuits, potatoes, rice, noodles, vegetables, plain meats, eggs) as soon as the vomiting stops. Do not stop food for more than 24 hours even if the diarrhoea is continuing.

Can the illness be spread?

Gastroenteritis caused by viruses, bacteria and parasites can be easily spread from person to person, especially if hygiene is poor, for example if someone who is ill prepares food for others without washing their hands. This is why it is important to thoroughly wash your hands with soap and water after using the toilet and before preparing, handling or eating foods.

Extra care must be taken when cleaning up faecal or vomit matter or items contaminated with these materials. Thoroughly clean and disinfect toilet and bathrooms areas after use.

Will I need time off school, childcare or work?

Your doctor, nurse or health protection officer can provide advice on this. Usually you can go back to work, childcare, school, etc., if you are well and have been free of symptoms for at **least 48 hours**. This is especially important if you are in a high-risk occupation such as a food handler, caregiver, nurse or childcare centre worker.

As you may be infectious for some days after recovery, good personal hygiene is important to prevent spreading the disease around. Good handwashing and hand drying after toileting is vital. Avoid swimming for at least 2 weeks after recovery.

For further information please contact:



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