

Gastroenteritis

WHAT IS GASTROENTERITIS?

Gastroenteritis (often called 'gastro') is a common infection of the bowel that can cause diarrhoea (runny faeces or poo), vomiting, or both.

Gastroenteritis can cause dehydration (loss of water), which sometimes results in a loss of sugar and salts that the body needs to work normally.

Gastroenteritis often settles without treatment. It is more common in winter and affects people of all ages.

WHAT CAUSES GASTROENTERITIS?

Viruses are the most common cause of gastroenteritis. There are many kinds of viruses, so gastroenteritis can occur more than once.

Viruses that cause gastroenteritis are found in human faeces.

Bacteria and parasites can also cause gastroenteritis and are usually found in contaminated food or water (food poisoning). Food poisoning usually occurs six to 12 hours after eating spoiled food.

HOW IS IT SPREAD?

Viral gastroenteritis is spread easily from person to person. When a person vomits or has diarrhoea, small droplets containing the virus can contaminate surfaces such as taps, toilet flush handles, children's toys and nappies. People with gastroenteritis can spread the virus up to 48 hours after their symptoms have stopped.

Bacterial gastroenteritis is spread through poor hygiene (especially not washing your hands after going to the toilet or after cleaning vomit or dirty nappies), spoiled food, polluted water supplies and handling pets and animals.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS?

Gastroenteritis may cause some or all of the following symptoms:

- nausea and vomiting that may last a day or two
- diarrhoea, which usually lasts one to three days but can last up to 10 days
- stomach cramps and pain
- fever.

Symptoms of more severe gastroenteritis include failing to keep down any fluids, not passing much urine and feeling faint while standing up. If you have any of these symptoms you should seek urgent medical care.

Diarrhoea that is black is not gastroenteritis – it can indicate bleeding in the stomach or bowel and requires urgent medical treatment.

Vomiting and diarrhoea can also be symptoms of other important illnesses. If you are concerned, see your doctor.

TREATMENT

Gastroenteritis is often mild and treatment will depend on the type.

- It is important to stay hydrated. Small amounts of fluid (sips) often are usually better tolerated, especially by people who are feeling sick. Solutions such as Gastrolyte or Hydralyte help replace the water and salts lost by vomiting and diarrhoea. Follow the instructions on the packet. Fluids like fruit juice and flat lemonade can be helpful if dilute with water (one part juice/lemonade and four parts water).
- Your doctor may advise taking a medication to stop the diarrhoea (Imodium, Lomotil). Follow the instructions on the packet. These medications are not suitable for children.
- Anti-nausea medication may be prescribed for nausea and vomiting. It is okay to eat if you are hungry.
- Antibiotics are only needed if the gastroenteritis is caused by bacteria or parasites. A sample of your diarrhoea may be tested for this.
- Some people may need intravenous (into the vein) fluids if they are very dehydrated.

HOME CARE

- Drink small amounts (sips) of clear fluids such as water often (every five to 10 minutes). The fluids will not stop the vomiting and diarrhoea but will stop you getting dehydrated.
- Eat if you feel hungry. Start with bland foods such as crackers, rice, bananas or dry toast. You should be back on normal fluids and diet in 48–72 hours, even if diarrhoea continues.
- Get plenty of rest.
- You should return to your doctor or hospital if you are unable to keep down enough fluids, feel dizzy when moving from sitting to standing, have pain that is not controlled by simple medications such as paracetamol, develop other symptoms, have a significant worsening of symptoms or your symptoms do not settle down in 24–48 hours.

STOPPING THE SPREAD OF GASTROENTERITIS

There are many ways to reduce the spread of gastroenteritis.

- Do not share your towels, face washer, toothbrush, drinks or cutlery with others.
- Wash your hands well (for at least 10 seconds) with warm soapy water after using the toilet, changing nappies, cleaning up vomit and before eating or cooking meals.
- Handle, store and prepare raw and cooked foods apart. Cook all raw foods well.
- People who have gastroenteritis should not prepare or handle food for others.
- Stay at home and away from others while you are unwell.
- Clean bathrooms and toilets often.
- Take care when handling animals and their faeces or urine.
- If you think the source of your illness may have been food, report it to your local council's health department right away. Keep any leftover food for testing.
- Return to school or work – guidelines vary between schools and workplaces. Hospital, healthcare and food handling staff should not return to work until 48 hours after the diarrhoea has settled. Check with your school/work about their requirements.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency call an ambulance – dial triple zero (000).

See your local doctor or healthcare professional if you have:

- stomach pain that is getting worse
- frequent vomiting or diarrhoea or both
- blood or mucus in your faeces (diarrhoea) or 'black' diarrhoea
- passed little or no urine
- are unable to keep down fluids
- feel dizzy or faint on standing
- you develop other symptoms that concern you.

For health advice from a registered nurse you can call NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day on 1300 60 60 24 for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to interpreting services for callers not confident with English.

* Calls from mobiles may be charged at a higher rate.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Ask your local doctor or healthcare professional.
- Visit the Better Health Channel at www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.

To receive this publication in an accessible format phone 9096 7770, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email

emergencycare.clinicalnetwork@safercare.vic.gov.au

Disclaimer: This health information is for general education purposes only. Please consult with your doctor or other health professional to make sure this information is right for you.

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