

Viral Gastroenteritis

What is viral gastroenteritis?

Viral gastroenteritis (often called 'viral gastro') is a common viral infection of the stomach and bowel that results in vomiting and diarrhoea. It is usually a mild illness and can be caused by a number of different viruses such as norovirus and rotavirus.

What are the symptoms?

The two main symptoms of viral gastroenteritis are diarrhoea and/or vomiting. Other symptoms may include: nausea, abdominal pain, muscle aches, tiredness, headaches, and mild fever. Symptoms take between 1 to 3 days to develop, with illness usually only lasting 1 to 2 days.

How is it spread?

Viral gastroenteritis is highly infectious and can easily be passed from person to person. Infection can occur in the following situations:

- close person to person contact, for example shaking hands with someone who has been sick and has the virus on their hands;
- direct contact with the vomit or faeces of an infected person;
- contact with contaminated objects or surfaces (such as door and tap handles);
- consuming contaminated food or drink;
- ingestion of virus particles that remain in the air after a person has vomited.

Who is at risk of infection?

Viral gastroenteritis can affect people of all ages and backgrounds.

Most people who have viral gastroenteritis make a full recovery without any long-term problems.

Viral gastroenteritis can be a serious illness for people who are unable to drink enough fluids to replace what they lose. This can lead to dehydration. Infants, young children, the elderly and people with disabilities are at greatest risk of dehydration. Those who are immunocompromised are at risk of severe illness because of their reduced ability to fight off the infection.

How is viral gastroenteritis diagnosed? Is there any treatment?

A diagnosis of viral gastroenteritis is usually based on a person's symptoms. During outbreaks, it may be important to do testing to identify exactly what is causing people's illness in order to guide public health responses (and exclude non-viral causes). This involves testing samples of faeces.

There is no specific treatment for viral gastroenteritis. It is very important to rest and drink lots of fluids (such as plain water or oral rehydration solutions) to avoid dehydration.

What should I do if my child has viral gastroenteritis?

The main treatment is to keep your child drinking fluids often such as water, oral rehydration solution, breastmilk or formula. It is very important to replace the fluids lost due to the vomiting and diarrhoea. Gastrolyte, HYDRALyte, Pedialyte and Repalyte are different types of oral rehydration fluid that can be used to replace fluids and body salts. These are the best option if your child is dehydrated, and can be bought from chemists and some supermarkets. Some oral rehydration solutions are also available in packaging that allows them to be frozen into ice blocks, which children may be more willing to have.

If your child refuses water or oral rehydration fluids, try diluted apple juice. Do not give drinks that are high in sugar (such as flat lemonade or sports drinks), because they can make dehydration worse. You can give your child their usual milk; however, some children may not feel like drinking milk if they have gastroenteritis.

If your baby is under six months old, they should always be seen by a doctor if they have gastroenteritis.

For babies over six months:

- if you are breastfeeding your baby – continue to do this but feed more often. Offer your baby a drink every time they vomit. You can also give oral rehydration solution or water during the first 12 hours.
- if you are bottle feeding your baby – replace formula feeds with oral rehydration solution or water during the first 12 hours. After this, give your baby their normal formula in small, but more frequent amounts. Offer your baby a drink every time they vomit.
- if your baby's symptoms do not seem to be improving over time, your baby should be seen by a doctor.

For older children:

- give small amounts of fluid often – give your child a few mouthfuls of fluid (water or oral rehydration solution) every 15 minutes. This is especially important if your child is vomiting a lot.
- your child may refuse food when they have gastroenteritis symptoms. This is not a problem as long as they are drinking fluids.
- do not give your child over-the-counter medicines that reduce vomiting and diarrhoea, as these medicines may be harmful for children.
- if your child's symptoms do not seem to be improving over time, your child should be seen by a doctor.

For more information about managing children at home, see the Royal Children's Hospital gastroenteritis fact sheet www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Gastroenteritis_gastro/.

How can viral gastroenteritis be prevented?

The most effective way of preventing viral gastroenteritis is to practice good hand washing. This is achieved by washing hands thoroughly using soap and running water for at least 10 seconds, followed by drying hands with a clean towel. You should always wash your hands before preparing food and before eating, after using the toilet, after changing nappies, and after assisting someone with diarrhoea and/or vomiting.

What should I do if I have viral gastroenteritis symptoms to prevent spreading it to others?

While you have gastroenteritis symptoms, and for the 48 hours after the symptoms have resolved, it is important to keep your hands clean by washing them often and thoroughly. You should also avoid preparing food for people during this time.

Immediately remove and wash any clothes or bedding contaminated with vomit or diarrhoea using detergent and hot water. Clean contaminated surfaces (for example benches, floors and toilets) immediately using detergent and hot water. Then disinfect surfaces using a bleach-based product diluted according to the manufacturer's instructions.

Do people need to be excluded from school or work?

Anyone with vomiting or diarrhoea should rest at home and not attend work, school or childcare, or visit a hospital or residential care facility, until vomiting and diarrhoea have stopped for 48 hours. During this time they should not prepare food for others, or care for patients, children or the elderly.

Outbreaks of viral gastroenteritis

Outbreaks of viral gastroenteritis are common in childcare centres and aged care facilities, and can also occur in healthcare settings (including hospitals) and schools. Under the *Public Health Act 1997*, outbreaks in these settings should be notified to the Health Protection Service. An outbreak is classified when there are two or more cases that have vomiting and/or diarrhoea within 24 hours.

During outbreaks in childcare, it is recommended that staff and children with vomiting and/or diarrhoea stay away from the centre until at least 48 hours after their symptoms have stopped.

During outbreaks in aged care, it is recommended that residents with vomiting and/or diarrhoea be isolated until at least 48 hours after their symptoms have stopped. Anyone entering their room should be following appropriate infection control measures. Staff with symptoms must stay away from the facility until at least 48 hours after their symptoms have stopped.

In all settings (including childcare and aged care facilities), specific outbreak control measures should be adopted. Public Health Officers from the Health Protection Service will liaise closely with facilities to provide appropriate advice and guidance on infection control measures during outbreaks.

Need more information?

For more information on viral gastroenteritis contact your doctor or call the Health Protection Service, Communicable Disease Control Information Line during business hours on **(02) 6205 2155**.

Communicable Disease Control Section at the Health Protection Service is responsible for the investigation and surveillance of notifiable or infectious conditions in the ACT in order to control or prevent their spread in the community. This includes the promotion of immunisation, education and other strategies that help to limit the spread of diseases.

Acknowledgements

Heymann DL, 2015, Control of Communicable Diseases Manual, 20th edition.

Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, Gastroenteritis fact sheet, 2018.

www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Gastroenteritis_gastro/

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