

Gastroenteritis in adults

Emergency Department factsheets



What is gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis (often called 'gastro') is the inflammation of the stomach and intestines. It is a common infection 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 gastro. There are many kinds of viruses, so gastroenteritis can occur more than once. Bacteria, parasites, drugs and food poisoning can also cause gastroenteritis.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptoms are diarrhoea and vomiting. The time from contact with the bacteria or the virus and the development of symptoms is usually about 1 – 3 days. Parasitic infections take about 5 – 15 days. Food poisoning usually occurs 6 to 12 hours after eating spoiled food.

How is it spread?

Viral gastro is spread easily from person to person. The viruses are found in human faeces. When a person vomits or has diarrhoea, small droplets containing the virus can soil 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. It is very contagious and outbreaks will be seen in places such as schools.

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.

Signs and symptoms?

Gastro 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 ten days.
- stomach cramps and pain.
- fever (temperature over 37.5 C in adults and over 38 C in children).

In bacterial gastro, the symptoms are similar but the fever is often higher, stomach cramps are worse and diarrhoea can have blood and mucus in it.

Treatment

Your health care professional will advise you if you need any treatment. Most gastroenteritis infections resolve without treatment. It is very important to drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration. Solutions such as Gastrolyte or Hydralyte help replace the water, salts and fluid lost by vomiting and diarrhoea. They also come in icy-poles, which entice children to keep their fluids up. Follow the instructions on the packet.

- For mild diarrhoea your doctor may advise taking an agent such as Imodium or Lomotil. Follow the instructions on the packet. These medications are not suitable for use in children.
- For moderate to severe diarrhoea avoid anti-diarrhoea agents as they may make the diarrhoea worse. Anti-nausea medication may be prescribed for nausea and vomiting.

- Antibiotics are only needed if the gastro 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 or flat lemonade (one cup of lemonade to four cups of water) often (every 15 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, soups, 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.

Stopping the spread of gastro

There are many ways to reduce the spread of gastro.

- Adults should not return to work until diarrhoea has ceased. Children should not return to child care or school until diarrhoea has ceased for 24 hours. People who work in the food industry or health care professionals should not return to work until diarrhoea has ceased for 48 hours.
- Do not share your towels, face washer, toothbrush, drinks or cutlery with others.
- Wash your hands well (for at least 15 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 gastro should not prepare or handle food for others.
- If you plan to travel, drink only bottled water or boil water for ten minutes. If you cannot peel it, cook it or boil it, do not eat it.
- 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 health department right away. Keep any leftover food for testing.

Seeking help

In a medical emergency, go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).

See your local doctor or health care professional if you have:

- stomach pain that is getting worse
- frequent vomiting or diarrhoea or both
- blood or mucous in your faeces (diarrhoea) with a fever
- passed little or no urine, or your urine is dark or smelly.

13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) provides health information, referral and teletriage services to the public in all parts of Queensland and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year for the cost of a local call*.

*Calls from mobile phones may be charged at a higher rate. Please check with your telephone service provider

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