

Gastroenteritis

Emergency Department factsheets

What is gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis (often called 'gastro') is the inflammation of the stomach and intestines. Gastroenteritis may cause dehydration (loss of water), which sometimes results in a loss of the sugars and salts which 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. Food poisoning usually occurs 6 to 12 hours after eating spoiled food. Parasitic infections take about 5 – 15 days.

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).

How is it spread?

Viral gastroenteritis 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, and utensils. People 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 and polluted water supplies. Parasites may be passed onto humans through the handling of pets and animals.

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. 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.
- 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 these agents.
- Some people may need intravenous (into the vein) fluids if they are very dehydrated.

Stopping the spread of gastro

- Adults should not return to work until diarrhoea has ceased. 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.
- 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.
- If you plan to travel to certain countries, drink only bottled water or boiled water. If you cannot peel it, cook it or boil it, do not eat it.

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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