

Viral Gastroenteritis

What is gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis (stomach flu) is a viral infection that affects the stomach and small intestine. The illness is usually brief, lasting 1 to 3 days.

How does it occur?

Gastroenteritis is caused by swallowing certain viruses. The body fluids of infected people contain the virus, sometimes even before their symptoms begin. The virus can be spread by direct contact with an infected person (for example, kissing or shaking hands) or by sharing food, drink, or eating utensils.

The virus enters the stomach and intestine and inflames the lining of these organs. As a result, the stomach and intestine are temporarily unable to perform their usual functions. The virus can also cause food to move more rapidly through your gastrointestinal (GI) tract.

Some bacteria and other tiny organisms called protozoa can cause infections that have symptoms similar to those of viral gastroenteritis.

What are the symptoms?

When you have stomach flu, you may have one or more of the following symptoms:

- fatigue
- chills
- loss of appetite
- nausea
- vomiting
- stomach cramps
- diarrhea
- low-grade fever
- muscle aches.

The illness may develop over a period of hours, or it may suddenly start with stomach cramps, vomiting, or diarrhea.

How is it treated?

The most important thing to do is to rest the stomach and intestines. You can do this by first eating nothing and drinking only clear liquids. A little later you can eat soft bland foods that are easy to digest. During the vomiting phase of the illness it is best to have only small, frequent sips of liquids. Drinking too much at once, even an ounce or two, may cause more vomiting. Your choice of liquids is important. If water is the only liquid you can drink without vomiting, that is okay. However, if you have been vomiting frequently for a long time, you must replace the minerals, sodium and potassium, that are lost when you vomit. Gatorade will provide you with these. Other clear liquids you can drink are weak tea and dilute apple juice. You may also drink soft drinks without caffeine (such as 7-UP) after letting them lose some of their carbonation (go flat). Chilling the liquids may help you keep them down. Avoid liquids that are acidic (such as orange juice) or caffeinated (such as coffee) or have a lot of carbonation. Do not drink milk until you no longer have diarrhea.

You may start eating soft bland foods when you have not vomited for several hours and are able to drink clear liquids without further upset. Soda crackers, toast, noodles, applesauce, and bananas are good first choices. Avoid foods that are acidic, spicy, fatty, or fibrous (meats, coarse grains, vegetables) and dairy products. You may start eating these foods again in 3 days or so, when all signs of illness have passed.

If you have been vomiting for more than a day or have had diarrhea for over 3 days, call your health care provider. You may need to have a physical exam to rule out more serious problems and to check for dehydration. You may also need to have lab tests to determine whether bacteria or protozoa are causing your illness.

Dehydration is a potentially serious complication of gastroenteritis. It can occur if your body loses too much fluid because you keep vomiting or having diarrhea. If you are severely dehydrated, you may need to be given fluids intravenously (IV). In children and the elderly, dehydration can quickly become life threatening.

How long do the effects last?

Gastroenteritis rarely lasts longer than 1 to 3 days. However, it may be 1 to 2 weeks before your bowel habits return completely to normal. Call your health care provider if:

- You continue to have severe symptoms for more than 2 or 3 days.
- Minor symptoms persist for several days (for example, loss of appetite, nausea, diarrhea).
- You develop symptoms that are not usually caused by gastroenteritis, such as blood in your vomit, bloody diarrhea, or severe abdominal pain.

How can I take care of myself?

Rest your stomach and intestines by following the guidelines above, but make sure you prevent dehydration by drinking enough liquids. Drink just small amounts frequently during the vomiting phase of your illness.

What can I do to help prevent gastroenteritis?

The single, most helpful way to prevent the spread of gastroenteritis is frequent, thorough hand washing. Also, avoid contact with the body fluids of an infected person, including saliva. Don't share food with someone who has gastroenteritis.