

Infectious Disease Factsheet

Gastroenteritis is commonly caused by viral infections resulting in vomiting and diarrhoea. The viruses are easily spread from person to person. Thorough washing of hands with soap and running water are vital to prevent spread.

Viral Gastroenteritis

Last updated: 29 November 2007

What is viral gastroenteritis?

Viral gastroenteritis is a common infection of the stomach and intestines that results in vomiting and diarrhoea. It can be caused by a number of different viruses, such as Rotavirus and Norovirus (previously known as Norwalk-like virus). There are many other causes of gastroenteritis including bacteria, toxins, parasites, and some non-infectious diseases.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptoms of viral gastroenteritis are vomiting and watery diarrhoea. Other symptoms may include nausea, fever, abdominal pain, headache, and muscle aches. Dehydration can follow. Symptoms can take between one and three days to develop and usually last between one and two days, sometimes longer.

How is it spread?

Viral gastroenteritis is highly infectious and is spread by the vomit or faeces of an infected person through:

- person-to-person contact, for example shaking hands with someone who has been sick and has the virus on their hands
- contaminated objects
- contaminated food or drink

Infection may also be spread through aerosolised particles when

people vomit.

In most cases, spread occurs from a person who has symptoms. Some people can pass on the infection without symptoms, particularly in the first 48 hours after recovery.

Who is at risk?

Viral gastroenteritis can affect people of all ages.

How is it prevented?

After using the toilet, changing nappies, and before eating or preparing food, wash your hands thoroughly with soap and running water for at least 10 seconds and dry them with a clean towel.

How is it diagnosed?

A diagnosis of viral gastroenteritis is usually based on the person's symptoms. Laboratory confirmation is important during outbreaks, and involves testing samples of stool (faeces).

How is it treated?

There is no specific treatment for viral gastroenteritis except rest and drinking plenty of fluids. Most people will recover without complications. However, viral gastroenteritis can be serious for those who may have difficulty replacing fluids and salts lost through vomiting and diarrhoea.

People with vomiting or diarrhoea should:

- rest at home and not attend work or school or child care while sick
- not prepare food for others or care for patients, children, or the elderly. These precautions should continue until 48 hours after diarrhoea or vomiting ceases. This includes people who prepare food in the home or working in the food industry.
- wash hands thoroughly with soap and running water for 10 seconds after using the toilet
- drink plenty of clear fluids, for example juice or soft drink diluted 1 part to 4 parts water, to prevent dehydration. Avoid undiluted fruit juice and soft drinks as they may increase dehydration and diarrhoea. Rehydration drinks that replace fluids and salts are available from chemists. Intravenous fluids may be needed in severe cases of dehydration.

People caring for those with gastroenteritis should wash hands thoroughly with soap and running water after any contact with the sick person. Cleaning soiled surfaces and clothing reduces further spread of the virus.

When cleaning up vomit or faeces:

- wear gloves
- wash hands with soap and running water for 10 seconds after gloves are removed and disposed
- use disposable paper towels or rags to remove any solid material and seal them in a plastic bag before placing in the rubbish bin
- clean any soiled object or surface with hot water and detergent and allow to dry thoroughly
- some people also recommend wearing a mask.

What is the public health response?

Outbreaks of viral gastroenteritis increase in winter and are common within families and group settings including nursing homes, hospitals, childcare centres, and schools. Doctors and hospitals are required to notify their local public health unit whenever there are at least two cases of gastroenteritis that are linked.

Public health units are able to:

- advise on how to identify an outbreak
- advise on how to control the outbreak
- help investigate outbreaks to determine the source and mode of transmission
- advise on the exclusion of people with viral gastroenteritis from work, school or other public gatherings.

For more information

- Controlling outbreaks
<http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/factsheets/infectious/gastroenteritiscontr.html>
- How to look after children with gastroenteritis
<http://www.chw.edu.au/parents/factsheets/gastroj.htm>
- Hospital Gastro Pack
/resources/publichealth/infectious/diseases/hospital_pack_pdf.asp
- Aged Care Facilities Gastro Pack
/resources/publichealth/infectious/diseases/gastro_pack_pdf.asp
- Petting Zoos and Personal Hygiene
/factsheets/infectious/pettingzoo_fs.html

Further information - Public Health Units in NSW

For more information please contact your doctor, local public health unit or community health centre - look under NSW Government at the front of the White Pages

Metropolitan Areas	Location	Number	Rural Areas	Location	Number
Northern Sydney/Central Coast	Hornsby	02 9477 9400	Greater Southern	Goulburn	02 4824 1837
	Gosford	02 4349 4845		Albury	02 6080 8900
South Eastern Sydney/Illawarra	Randwick	02 9382 8333	Greater Western	Broken Hill	08 8080 1499
	Wollongong	02 4221 6700		Dubbo	02 6841 5569
Sydney South West	Camperdown	02 9515 9420		Bathurst	02 6339 5601
Sydney West	Penrith	02 4734 2022	Hunter/New England	Newcastle	02 4924 6477
	Parramatta	02 9840 3603		Tamworth	02 6767 8630
Justice Health Service	Matraville	02 9311 2707	North Coast	Port Macquarie	02 6588 2750
				Lismore	02 6620 7500

See full details of Public Health Units at www.health.nsw.gov.au/publichealth/infectious/phus.asp