



Gastroenteritis

What is gastroenteritis and what are the symptoms?

Gastroenteritis, or “gastro”, is an illness caused by infection and/or inflammation of the digestive tract. It is characterised by nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and/or stomach cramps. Other symptoms may include fever, headache, blood or pus in the faeces, loss of appetite, bloating, lethargy and body aches.

The illness is usually self-limiting and resolves in a few days.

What are the causes?

There are many things that can cause gastroenteritis including: bacteria (eg *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, *Shigella*); viruses (eg Rotavirus, Norovirus); parasites (eg *Cryptosporidium*, *Giardia*); and bacterial toxins (eg from *Staphylococcal* bacteria). Some antibiotics can also cause gastroenteritis in susceptible people.

Identification of the cause is usually only possible by testing of a stool or vomit sample.

How is it spread?

Infectious gastroenteritis can be spread by the transmission of pathogens through ingestion of contaminated food or water, or by contact with infected persons, environments or pets and other animals.

How long are cases infectious?

The infectious period is dependent upon the organism responsible. People can still be infectious even when symptoms have passed. Some people and animals can carry the germs that cause gastroenteritis in their faeces without having any symptoms. These people and animals can still pass the illness on to others.

Who is at risk?

Anyone can get gastroenteritis. The very young and the elderly are most at risk of developing severe dehydration.

Travellers to areas with inadequately treated water may become ill from drinking contaminated water or eating incorrectly washed food.

What is the treatment?

The most important part of treatment is preventing and treating dehydration. Anyone with diarrhoea or vomiting should drink extra fluids to avoid dehydration. Rehydration therapy with oral glucose/electrolyte solution is particularly effective.

If children refuse this solution, diluted fruit juice or soft drink may be given (1 part juice/soft drink to 3 parts water).

Babies should continue to be offered their normal feeds plus extra fluids in between feeds.

Sometimes specific medications are required to treat gastroenteritis caused by bacteria, viruses or parasites.

Medicines to prevent vomiting or diarrhoea should not be given, especially to children, except when prescribed by a doctor.

How can gastroenteritis be controlled?

Good hygiene is important in limiting the spread of gastroenteritis. Hands should be washed thoroughly with warm soapy water, particularly

- after going to the toilet
- before preparing or handling food
- after every nappy change
- after changing soiled linen

Other measures include

- never change nappies on tables or counters where food is prepared or eaten
- surfaces that may be contaminated should be cleaned thoroughly using a chlorine-based steriliser in accordance with manufacturer's recommendations

In the kitchen

- cook meat, fish and poultry thoroughly and do not let raw meat contaminate other food
- keep cold food cold (below 5°C) and hot food hot (above 60°C) to discourage bacterial growth
- people with vomiting or diarrhoea should not prepare or handle food that will be eaten by others

When travelling in areas where there are concerns about the safety of the water supply, do not drink tap water. Avoid uncooked food or undercooked food and be sure to eat only fruit or vegetables that can be peeled.

Health care workers and food handlers should not go back to work until 48 hours after diarrhoea and vomiting have ceased.

Children should be excluded from childcare/school until 24 hours has passed since a loose bowel motion or episode of vomiting.

Anyone with diarrhoea should not swim, wade or paddle in public pools.

Should I contact my doctor?

Children with diarrhoea, who vomit or who refuse extra fluids should see a doctor. Additionally, anyone

- with prolonged (> 3 days) or severe diarrhoea
- with blood in their stools
- who has just returned from overseas
- who is concerned about their symptoms

should also see a doctor.

Doctors and public health workers are interested in preventing outbreaks of diarrhoea. If there are 2 or more cases of gastroenteritis in a group, these should be reported to the local Centre for Disease Control.

For more information contact your nearest Centre for Disease Control.

Darwin	8922 8044
Katherine	8973 9049
Nhulunbuy	8987 0359
Tennant Creek	8962 4259
Alice Springs	8951 7549

Disease Control fact sheets on gastroenteritis diseases caused by specific bacteria, viruses and parasites are available by contacting your nearest centre or from our web site at:
<http://www.nt.gov.au/health/cdc>