

What is gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis (often called 'gastro') is a common infection of the bowel 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.

Viruses that cause gastroenteritis are found in human faeces.

Bacteria and parasites can also cause gastroenteritis, and are usually found in contaminated food or water (food poisoning). Food poisoning usually occurs six to 12 hours after eating spoiled food.

How is it spread?

Viral gastro is spread easily from person to person. When a person vomits or has diarrhoea, small droplets containing the virus can contaminate 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.

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.

What are the 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 10 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.

Symptoms of more severe gastro include failing to keep down any fluids at all, not passing much urine and feeling faint while standing up. If you have any of these symptoms you should seek urgent medical care.

Diarrhoea that is black is not gastroenteritis – it can indicate bleeding in the large intestine (bowel) and requires urgent medical treatment.

Treatment

Gastro is often mild and treatment will depend on the type of gastro.

- Solutions such as *Gastrolyte* or *Hydralyte* help replace the water and salts 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 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 often (every five to ten 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, 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.
- You should return to your doctor or hospital if you are unable to keep down enough fluids, feel dizzy on standing or have a significant worsening of symptoms.

Stopping the spread of gastro

There are many ways to reduce the spread of gastro.

- Do not share your towels, face washer, toothbrush, drinks or cutlery with others.
- Wash your hands well (for at least 10 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.
- Stay at home and away from others while you are unwell.
- If you plan to travel, drink only bottled water or boil water for 10 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.

Return to childcare, school or work – guidelines vary between childcare centres and schools and according to the place where you work. Hospital, health care and food handling staff should not return to work until 48 hours after the diarrhoea has settled. Check with your childcare centre/school/work about their requirements.

Notes:

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 mucus in your faeces (diarrhoea)
- passed little or no urine, or your urine is dark or smelly.



For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call **NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day** on **1300 60 60 24** for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to **interpreting services** for callers not confident with English. Call **1300 60 60 24**.

*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate



Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional.
- Visit the **Better Health Channel** www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

If you would like to receive this publication in an **accessible format**, please phone 9096 0578 or email edfactsheets@health.vic.gov.au



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