

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

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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 infants, people with suppressed immune systems and the elderly. People with vomiting or diarrhoea should:

- rest at home and not attend work while sick. Infants and children attending childcare or school should be excluded from attending for 48 hours after the resolution of symptoms
- 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

- Norovirus Factsheet <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Pages/norovirus.aspx>
- Controlling outbreaks <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Pages/gastroenteritis-outbreaks.aspx>
- Guidelines for the public health management of gastroenteritis outbreaks due to norovirus <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/cda-cdna-norovirus.htm>
- How to look after children with gastroenteritis <https://www.schn.health.nsw.gov.au/factsheets/gastroenteritis>
- Hospital Gastro Pack <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/gastroenteritis/Documents/hospital-gastro-pack.pdf>
- Gastro Info Kit for Aged Care Facilities <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/gastroenteritis/Pages/gastro-agedcare-facilities.aspx>
- Petting Zoos and Personal Hygiene <http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Pages/petting-zoos-and-personal-hygiene.aspx>

For further information please call your local public health unit on **1300 066 055** or visit the New South Wales Health website www.health.nsw.gov.au