
Viral Gastroenteritis

What is Viral Gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis is inflammation of the stomach, small and large intestines. Viral gastroenteritis can be caused by many different viruses and results in vomiting and diarrhea. It is often called the “stomach flu”, although it is not caused by influenza viruses. Viruses that can cause gastroenteritis include rotaviruses, caliciviruses, astroviruses, and a group of Noroviruses. Viral gastroenteritis is NOT caused by bacteria or parasites, medications or other medical conditions, although the symptoms may be similar. Your doctor can help determine if the diarrhea is caused by a virus or by something else.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Symptoms of viral gastroenteritis are fever, watery diarrhea and vomiting. The ill person may also have headache or abdominal cramps. The symptoms begin 1 to 3 days following infection with a virus that causes gastroenteritis and may last from 1 to 10 days, depending upon which virus caused the illness. For most people, it is not a serious illness. People who get viral gastroenteritis almost always recover completely without complications. However, it may be more severe for infants, young children the elderly and immune compromised individuals are at risk for dehydration from loss of fluids. They may need to be hospitalized if their dehydration becomes severe.

Is it contagious?

Yes. The viruses that cause gastroenteritis are spread through close contact with an infected person (such as caring for an ill person). Individuals may also become infected by eating or drinking contaminated foods or beverages that have been handled by an infected food handler, especially if they do not wash their hands thoroughly after using the bathroom. People can also get sick if they do not wash their hands after touching contaminated surfaces or items and then place hands in their mouth (eating).

What is recommended?

- Most importantly, is to keep hydrated (drink plenty of fluids).
- For families with infants or children, speak to a medical professional such as a doctor to determine the best way to keep the child hydrated.
- Frequent handwashing, thorough cleaning and disinfection of potentially contaminated surfaces (such as faucets, door handles, toilet seats) will help prevent and control the spread of the virus
- Exclusion of the ill individual from daycare, school etc.

References: Adapted from Heymann, David L. (2008). Control of Communicable Diseases Manual. 19th Edition

Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, Population and Public Health Division, *Infectious Diseases Protocol, Appendix A*. 2019. http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/oph_standards/infdispro.aspx