

VIRAL DIARRHOEA AND VOMITING/VIRAL GASTROENTERITIS

What is it?

Gastroenteritis means inflammation of the stomach and small and large intestines. Viral gastro-enteritis is an infection caused by a variety of viruses that results in vomiting and/or diarrhoea.

What causes it?

Many different viruses, including rotaviruses and Norwalk like viruses. It is not caused by bacteria or parasites or by medications or other medical conditions, although the symptoms may be similar. Your doctor can determine if the diarrhoea is caused by a virus or by something else.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptoms of viral gastroenteritis are watery diarrhoea and/or vomiting which may be forceful. Other symptoms may include headache, fever, loss of appetite, lethargy and abdominal cramps ("stomach ache") which may last for 1 to 10 days, depending on which virus causes the illness.

Is it infectious?

Yes. Anyone can get it. Some viruses tend to cause diarrhoea among people in specific age groups. Rotavirus infection is the most common cause of diarrhoea in infants and young children under 5 years old. Norwalk like viruses are more likely to cause diarrhoea in older children and adults. Infections occur throughout the year but are much more common in the cooler months. Outbreaks can occur in settings, such as schools, child care facilities, and healthcare facilities but also in other group settings.

What is the incubation period?

In general, the symptoms begin 12 to 50 hours following infection.

How is it transmitted?

The viruses that cause gastroenteritis are spread through close contact with infected persons (for example, by sharing food, water, or eating utensils). Individuals may also become infected by eating or drinking contaminated foods or beverages.

Is there any treatment?

No. The most important treatment in children and adults is to prevent severe loss of fluids (dehydration). Infants, young children, and persons who are unable to care for themselves, such as the disabled or elderly, are at risk of dehydration as are immune-compromised people because they may get a more serious illness.

How can I prevent infection?

Prevention of spread occurs as a result of:

- Good standards of personal and food hygiene particularly hand hygiene.
- Prompt disinfection of contaminated surfaces with bleach based products if the surface will tolerate this.
- Good standards of infection control in hospitals, including environmental cleaning.
- Cooking raw shellfish before consumption and washing fruit if it is to be eaten raw. If food or water is thought to be contaminated it should be avoided.

How soon can the person/child return to work/school/ Nursery?

When the person feels well and is a **minimum of 48 hours symptom free**. In some cases this may need to be increased to 72 hours. Exclusion from swimming should be for 2 weeks following last episode of diarrhoea.