

Gastroenteritis – viral

What is viral gastroenteritis (gastro)?

Gastroenteritis may often be caused by viruses such as norovirus (previously known as Norwalk-like virus), rotavirus, astrovirus and adenovirus.

These viruses can be found in human faeces.

The most common symptoms of viral gastro are non-bloody diarrhoea, vomiting (which may be severe) nausea, headache and fever and chills, lasting 12–60 hours.

The spread of infection to other people in the household and other close contacts is very common.

How does viral gastro spread?

Viral gastro occurs when viruses are taken in by mouth.

This may happen in any of the following ways:

- From person to person. This may occur directly – by close personal contact or contact with the faeces or vomit of an infected person, or indirectly – by touching contaminated surfaces such as taps, toilet flush handles, children’s toys and nappies. Airborne droplets may be formed when a person vomits or has diarrhoea. These droplets can also contaminate surfaces with viral particles.
- Drinking contaminated water or consuming food grown in, washed with or prepared with contaminated water.
- Eating contaminated food or drinking contaminated fluids.

After taking in a gastro virus by mouth it usually takes 10–72 hours before you become ill, depending on the type of virus.

Infected people can continue to have the virus in their faeces and pass the infection on to others for several days after their symptoms have stopped.

People can also briefly carry the viruses which cause viral gastro without ever having had any symptoms. These people can still pass the disease on to others.

I think I’ve got gastro – what should I do?

If you have symptoms of gastro, consider seeing your doctor. Some types of gastro may be diagnosed readily from a faecal specimen, other types may require more specialised tests. Although there is no specific treatment for viral gastro, your doctor can help relieve the ill effects caused by some of the symptoms.

Can I still work?

As viral gastro is very infectious, it is advisable that people with symptoms do not work until 48 hours after symptoms have stopped.

It is particularly important that food handlers, child care workers and health care workers do not work for at least 48 hours after diarrhoea has stopped.

What about children?

Children in child care centres, kindergartens or primary schools **must not** attend until there has not been a loose bowel motion for 24 hours.

How can I avoid the spread of viral gastro?

In your household, the risk of spreading illness can be reduced by following basic hygiene rules:

Hand washing

Everyone should wash their hands thoroughly with soap and warm running water for at least 15 seconds:

- before preparing food
- before eating
- after going to the toilet or after changing nappies
- after cleaning up when someone has been sick.

Towels and face washers should not be shared with a person who has gastro.

Food preparation

Ensure that people with gastro do not prepare or handle food that is to be eaten by others.

Other precautions are:

- thoroughly cook all raw food
- thoroughly wash raw fruit and vegetables in clean water before eating
- reheat food until the internal temperature of the food reaches at least 75° C.

Household cleaning

When somebody has gastro symptoms, particular attention must be paid to cleaning surfaces such as toilet seats and handles, taps and nappy change tables. Ensure that all potentially contaminated areas are regularly cleaned and disinfected using a hypochlorite solution with a strength of about 1,000 ppm. (250 ml or one cup of household bleach diluted in 10 litres or one bucket of water).

Viral gastro may sometimes cause severe vomiting. When cleaning up vomit or faeces, to prevent the transmission of the virus it is important that the following procedure is used:

- Wear rubber gloves.
- Cover the vomit or faeces with 1,000 ppm hypochlorite solution (diluted as above) and leave for 10 minutes.
- Clean up vomit or faeces with paper towels or toilet paper, being careful not to spread it.
- Flush paper and vomit/faeces down the toilet.
- Wash area with warm water and detergent and bundle soiled cleaning cloths in a plastic bag.
- Disinfect area with 1,000 ppm hypochlorite solution (diluted as above) and leave for 10 minutes, then rinse area with clean water.
- Dispose of cleaning cloths in the sealed plastic bag.
- Remove gloves and wash and disinfect them in a hypochlorite solution.
- Wash hands with soap under warm running water.

If cleaning up vomit/faeces on a carpet, carry out the above procedure but do not disinfect with the hypochlorite solution, as this will bleach the carpet.

Carpeted areas should instead be steam cleaned to destroy the virus particles.

Cloth nappies, clothing and bedding which have been soiled by faeces or vomit should be cleaned in the following manner:

- Wear rubber gloves.
- Remove as much faeces or vomit as possible using paper towels or toilet paper and flush down the toilet.
- Soak the articles in 50 ppm hypochlorite solution (12.5 ml of household bleach diluted in 10 litres or one bucket of water) for half an hour if washing directions permit this, otherwise dry clean the articles.
- Remove gloves and wash and disinfect them in a hypochlorite solution.
- Wash hands with soap under warm running water.
- Wash articles in the washing machine on the hot cycle, if washing directions permit this, otherwise dry clean the articles.

Outbreaks

People in care centres such as hospitals, nursing homes and child care centres are particularly susceptible to outbreaks of viral gastro. It is important that strict personal hygiene rules and cleaning procedures are carried out in these facilities to control the spread of these viruses.

Outbreaks of gastro in care centres should be reported to the local council or the Department of Health and Human Services. For more specific advice on how to control the spread of gastro viruses in these settings, refer to the *Guide for the management and control of gastroenteritis outbreaks in aged care, special care, health care and residential care facilities*. This can be found at www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/infectious-diseases

Overseas travel

Viral gastro occurs worldwide. Outbreaks in some countries have been associated with eating raw shellfish.

- Careful selection and preparation of food and drinks when travelling offer the best protection against gastro.
- When travelling, avoid uncooked food and non-bottled drinks. Cooked food that is hot, and fruit and vegetables that can be peeled or shelled are generally safe.
- Drinking water should be boiled or chemically treated if its purity is in doubt. Ice should be avoided.

Further information

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