

## Gastroenteritis in Adults

Gastroenteritis causes diarrhea and / or vomiting. It is due to an infection in the gut. The main risk is dehydration. The main treatment is to have lots to drink. Rehydration drinks are sometimes advised. See a doctor if you suspect that you are dehydrating, or if you have other worrying symptoms listed below.

### What is gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis is an infection of the guts (intestines). Many bacteria, viruses, and other microbes (bugs) can cause gastroenteritis. It can range from a mild stomach upset for a day or two with some mild diarrhea, to severe vomiting and diarrhea for several days or longer.

### What are the symptoms of gastroenteritis?

- Diarrhea and / or vomiting are the main symptoms.
- Crampy pains in the abdomen (tummy) are common. Pains may ease for a while each time you pass some diarrhea.
- High temperatures (fever) and headaches are common.

If you have vomiting, it typically lasts a day or so. Diarrhea may last for several days or more after the vomiting stops. Loose stools (motions or faces) can persist for a week or so before a normal pattern returns.

### What causes gastroenteritis?

- A virus is a common cause in the US. Sometimes it is just 'one of those bugs going about'. Viruses are easily spread from one person to another by close contact, or when an infected person prepares food for others.
- Sometimes it is caused from infected food (food poisoning). Salmonella is a well-known bacterium that may infect food, but there are many other types of bacteria that can cause food poisoning.
- Water contaminated by bacteria or other microbes is a common cause in some countries with poor sanitation.

## Can gastroenteritis be prevented?

Good hygiene helps to prevent gastroenteritis. Always wash your hands:

- After you go to the toilet.
- Before you touch food.
- After gardening.
- After playing with pets (healthy animals can carry certain harmful bacteria).
- Between handling raw meat and food ready to be eaten. (There may be some bacteria on raw meat.)

If you have gastroenteritis, the following are also recommended until symptoms go.

- Regularly clean the toilets that you use.
- Wipe the flush handle and toilet seat with disinfectant (such as household bleach) after each time you use the toilet.
- Wash your hands thoroughly after going to the toilet. Don't share towels and flannels.
- Do not prepare food for others.

## What is the treatment for gastroenteritis in adults?

Symptoms often settle within a week or so as the immune system usually clears the infection. The following are commonly advised until symptoms ease.

- **Have lots to drink.** The aim is to avoid dehydration (low body fluid), which is the main possible complication. Dehydration is more likely to develop if you vomit a lot as well as have diarrhea. Even if you vomit, or don't feel like drinking, you should try to take frequent sips as you will still absorb some fluid. Have water as your main drink, but you should try to include some fruit juice as this contains some sugar. However, any drink is better than none.
- **A doctor or nurse may advise rehydration drinks** if they are concerned that you are at risk of dehydration. You can drink these instead of, or in addition to, normal drinks. Rehydration drinks can be bought from pharmacies. Rehydration drinks provide a perfect balance of water, salt, and sugar. They are better than just drinking water alone. The small amount of sugar and salt helps the water to be absorbed better from the gut into the body. They do not stop or reduce diarrhea, but are the best drinks to prevent or treat dehydration. (Do not use home made salt drinks, as the quantity of salt has to be exact.)
- **Eat as normally as possible.** It used to be advised to 'starve' for a while, but this is now known to be wrong. However, you may not feel like food and most adults can do without food for a few days (but don't stop drinking). Eat as soon as you are able. Soups and foods high in carbohydrate such as bread or pasta are best to start with.
- **Anti-diarrhea medicines** are not usually advised. Plenty to drink and a 'let it out' approach is often all that is required. However, you may wish to limit the number of toilet trips. You can buy anti-diarrhea medicines from pharmacies. Possibly the safest and most effective is loperamide. The dose of this is 2 capsules at first, followed by 1 capsule after each time you pass some diarrhea. The maximum is 8 capsules in 24hrs. It

works by slowing down the gut's activity. (Note: you should not give anti-diarrhea medicines to children.)

- **Tylenol** is useful to ease a high temperature or headache.

However, some gut infections do not clear without treatment. If symptoms are severe, or persist, a doctor may ask for a stool sample. This is sent to the lab to look for infecting microbes (bacteria, parasites, etc). Sometimes an antibiotic or other treatments are needed.

### **Are there any complications from gastroenteritis?**

Complications are uncommon. See a doctor if any of the following develop, or if any other symptoms occur which you are concerned about.

- Dehydration. Symptoms include: passing little urine, a dry mouth and tongue, drowsiness.
- Blood in the diarrhea.
- Vomiting for more than 1-2 days, or diarrhea, which does not start to settle after 3-4 days.
- Pains which are getting worse
- Drowsiness or confusion.
- Infections caught abroad.

Admission to hospital is sometimes needed if symptoms are severe, or if complications develop.