UK Health Security Agency

UKHSA East of England
Health Protection Team

INFECTIOUS GASTROENTERITIS FACTSHEET

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Gastroenteritis is an infection of the stomach and intestines (gut). It causes diarrhoea, and may also cause vomiting, tummy pain and fever. In most cases the infection clears over a few days, but sometimes takes longer. The main risk is dehydration and so it is important to have lots to drink. See a doctor if you suspect that the affected person is getting dehydrated, or if they have any worrying symptoms, listed below.

What causes it?

Many viruses, bacteria, and other germs can cause gastroenteritis. The infection interferes with the absorption of water from the intestines. This is why the most common symptoms of gastroenteritis are diarrhoea and vomiting; both of which are caused by the excess of unabsorbed fluids in the intestine.

- Viruses are a common cause in the UK. They are easily spread from one person to another by close contact, or when an infected person prepares food for others.
- Infection with a virus called **rotavirus** is the most common cause of gastroenteritis in children in the UK. Most children in the UK will have a rotavirus infection by the age of five.
- Food poisoning causes some cases of gastroenteritis. Many different types of germs can cause food poisoning. Bacteria called campylobacter and salmonella are the commonest in the UK

What are the main symptoms?

- The main symptoms are diarrhoea, vomiting, nausea (feeling sick), fever and headache.
- Stomach cramps may occur. If vomiting occurs, it usually lasts only a day or two. Loose stools can persist for a week or so before a normal pattern returns.

How can you prevent gastroenteritis?

Good personal hygiene helps to prevent gastroenteritis. In particular, always wash your hands, and teach children to wash theirs:

- After going to the toilet (and after changing nappies)
- Before touching food and between handling raw meat and food ready to be eaten
- After gardening
- After playing with pets (healthy animals can carry certain harmful bacteria).

Practising good food hygiene will help you to avoid developing gastroenteritis as a result of food poisoning. Some ways of achieving this are:

- Regularly washing hands, surfaces, and utensils with hot, soapy water
- Never storing raw and cooked foods together
- Making sure that food is kept properly refrigerated • Always cooking your food thoroughly
- Never eating food that is past its use-by date

What action should you take? Most cases of gastroenteritis can be managed at home using a number of self-care techniques. The most important thing is to replace any fluids that have been lost through diarrhoea and vomiting; special rehydration drinks are available. Antibiotics are not normally recommended for the treatment of gastroenteritis.

If you or your children have gastroenteritis, do not return to work, or let your children go to school/ nursery, until 48 hours has passed since the last episode of diarrhoea or vomiting. With some forms of gastroenteritis, e.g., cryptosporidiosis, it is important not to go swimming until at least 2 weeks after symptoms have stopped.

Most forms of gastroenteritis are highly infectious. If anyone in your household has gastroenteritis, you can limit spread by:

Washing hands thoroughly and making sure your children do so after going to toilet, and before eating food,

- **Cleaning and disinfecting the toilet**, including the handle and the seat, with detergent solution, followed by bleach solution, after each time the toilet is used
- **Not sharing towels, flannels, cutlery, or utensils** with other household members while there is illness. Normal washing (wash laundry on as hot a wash as possible) will ensure these articles are safe for use by others

Contacting your doctor: See your doctor if you concerned about your illness or if any of the following develop:

- Blood in the diarrhoea or vomit
- Vomiting or diarrhoea that does not start to settle after 3 days
- Severe and worsening tummy pains
- Drowsiness or confusion
- Unable, over a period of more than 24 hours, to keep any fluids down after drinking

Further information or general advice is available from: NHS 111 service on 111 or www.nhs.uk/111