

Gastroenteritis & Dehydration



Family Medicine Department

What is gastroenteritis and what causes it?

Gastroenteritis is an infection of the gut. It causes diarrhoea and also vomiting, abdominal pain, fever and other symptoms. The severity of the symptoms varies for different patients. The infection may be caused by viruses, bacteria or parasitic infection which can be transmitted in food, water, or by contact with an infected person.

Viruses are most easily spread from one person to another by close contact, or from contact with an infected surface or food prepared by an infected person. Viruses can spread easily in institutions such as schools and nurseries.

Food poisoning and water contamination are other common causes of gastroenteritis, often caused by bacteria or parasites.

What are the symptoms of gastroenteritis and how long will they last?

- The main symptom is diarrhoea, often with vomiting – diarrhoea means loose, watery stools at least 3 times in 24 hours. Blood or mucus may appear in the stool with some infections.
- Crampy tummy pains are common and often ease after each loose stool.
- Fever, headache and aching limbs sometimes occur.



- If vomiting occurs, it often lasts only a day or so. Diarrhoea often lasts several more days, with slightly loose stools continuing for up to a week or more.

Dehydration

Vomiting and diarrhoea may cause dehydration (a lack of fluid in the body). Mild dehydration is common and easily reversed by drinking lots of fluid.

In adults, symptoms of dehydration include tiredness, dizziness, headache, dry mouth, muscle cramps and weakness.

In children symptoms of dehydration include passing little urine, dry tongue and lips, fewer tears when crying, sunken eyes, weakness, becoming lethargic or irritable.



Dehydration in adults is more likely to occur in elderly or frail people, pregnant women, people with severe vomiting or diarrhoea.

Dehydration in children is more likely to occur in babies under 1 year, babies who were low birth weight, a breastfed baby who has stopped feeding during their illness, any baby or child who does not drink much during their illness, any baby or child who has passed more than 6 loose stools, or vomited more than 3 times, in 24 hours.

How is gastroenteritis diagnosed?

Most people with gastroenteritis recognise their symptoms and will recover within a few days. During a consultation with a doctor you will be asked questions to determine the possible cause of your infection, and to assess its severity such as level of dehydration.

Tests are not usually needed, however, if you are particularly unwell, have recently travelled abroad, have bloody stools, are admitted to hospital, or your symptoms are not getting better, you may be asked to collect a stool sample. This can be examined by the laboratory over a 48 hour period to determine the cause of the infection.

What is the treatment of gastroenteritis?

Symptoms often settle within a few days as your immune system usually clears the infection. Antibiotics are not routinely given as most cases of gastroenteritis are self limiting, and there is risk of side effects and the development of resistant infections.

Fluids

For adults, drink 200ml after each loose stool, in addition to what you would normally drink. Normally an adult should drink 2l fluid per day, increased during hot weather. If you vomit, wait 5-10 minutes, then drink again more slowly – for example a sip every 2-3 minutes. You should drink more if you are dehydrated. Fluid used should mainly be water, and ideally some soup. A syringe may be helpful for babies and children who are unable to take sips.



It is best not to have drinks that are carbonated or contain lots of sugar as they may make the diarrhoea worse.

Babies under 6 months are at increased risk of dehydration and should be seen by a doctor for review and advice. Breast and bottle-fed babies should be encouraged to feed normally – their demand may increase.

Rehydration drinks are recommended for those who are at higher risk of dehydration (see above) – they do not reduce the severity of diarrhoea. The doctor will advise on the amount, rate and type of fluid rehydration for children, depending on their age and weight.

If dehydration is severe, it may be appropriate to admit for rehydration using a nasogastric tube or intravenous fluids.

Diet

It is now advised to eat small, light meals if you can, as guided by your appetite. However, most adults can do without food for a few days. Avoid fatty, spicy or heavy food at first. Plain foods such as wholemeal bread and rice are suggested.

Children should be rehydrated before having any solid food. However, most children will not be significantly dehydrated and should not be starved.

Adding probiotics to the diet may reduce the duration of diarrhoea by restoring the normal flora to the gut.

Medication

Diarrhoea usually settles without the need for medicine. If it is socially embarrassing, anti-diarrhoea preparations can sometimes help to reduce the frequency of diarrhoea but should not be taken by children under 12 years, if you pass blood or mucus in the stool, if you have a high fever, and by certain people such as pregnant women.

Paracetamol and ibuprofen are helpful for high temperature and headache. Antibiotics should be avoided unless directed by your doctor.

When should I seek further medical advice?

- If you think you are becoming dehydrated.
- If you are unable to keep fluids down.
- If you have blood in your diarrhoea or vomit.
- If you have severe abdominal pain.
- If you feel your symptoms are becoming worse.
- If you have a persisting high fever.
- Vomiting more than 1 day, or diarrhoea more than 2 days
- Infections caught abroad.
- If you are elderly, or have an underlying health problem, or weakened immune system.
- If you are pregnant.

Warning signs for dehydration in adults:

Weakness, confusion, rapid heart rate, producing little urine.

Warning signs for dehydration in children:

Drowsiness, pale or mottled skin, jittery movements, cold hands or feet, very few wet nappies, fast and shallow breathing.

Prevention of spread to others

Gastroenteritis is easily passed to others. To minimise the spread of infections, the following is recommended:

- Wash hands thoroughly after using the toilet, ideally using liquid soap in warm running water, and dry hands thoroughly.
- If a potty has been used, wears gloves when you handle it, dispose of the contents in the toilet, then wash the potty with hot water and detergent and leave to dry.
- If clothing or bedding is soiled, first remove the stool into the toilet, then wash in a separate wash, at as high a temperature as possible.
- **Don't share** towels.
- **Don't prepare or serve food to others.**
- Regularly clean the toilets you use with disinfectant, wiping all the surfaces at least once a day.
- Stay off work, school etc until the diarrhoea or vomiting stops.
- If the cause is known to be *Cryptosporidium*, you should not use swimming pools for at least 2 weeks.
- Preventing development of infection.
- Always wash your hands:
 - After using the toilet
 - Before you touch food
 - Between touching raw meat and any food ready to be eaten
 - After gardening
 - After playing with pets





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