

Viral Gastroenteritis

Viral diarrhoea and vomiting

What is Viral Gastroenteritis?

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

What causes it?

It can be caused by one of 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 if you are able to provide a sample. This process can take up to two weeks and your symptoms should have resolved by this time.

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 one to seven days, depending on which virus is causing 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 five 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 winter months.

Outbreaks can occur in various settings, such as schools, child care facilities, care homes and healthcare facilities but also in other group settings, such as banquet halls, cruise ships etc.

What is the incubation period?

In general, the symptoms begin 12 to 48 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 for children and adults is to replace the severe loss of fluids (dehydration) that both vomiting and diarrhoea cause.

There are supplements available that can help replace essential minerals that are added to water i.e. Dioralyte. Dioralyte can be used to replace essential water and salt loss in infants, children & adults in the treatment of acute diarrhoea and is available at most good chemists.

Early use is important to avoid dehydration, particularly in the young and elderly. Infants, young children, and persons who are unable to care for themselves are at risk of dehydration as are immune-compromised people because they may develop a more serious illness.

How can I prevent infection?

Actions to help the prevention of spread include:

- Good standards of personal hygiene particularly hand hygiene
- Good standards of food hygiene
- Prompt disinfection of contaminated surfaces with bleach based products if the surface will tolerate this
- Good standards of infection control in care environments, 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 effected person/child return to work/school/nursery?

At least 48 hours after the last episode of diarrhoea or vomiting and when the person feels well again. In some cases this may need to be increased to 72 hours.