UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

GASTROENTERITIS

WHAT IS IT?
Gastroenteritis refers to inflammation of the stomach and intestines. It is most commonly caused by viruses, although bacteria and parasites may sometimes be responsible.

Viral gastroenteritis is a self-limited disease and is most commonly caused by the norovirus. Other viral agents include the rotavirus, adenovirus, and astrovirus. Even though it is commonly referred to as the “stomach flu”, viral gastroenteritis is not the same thing as “the flu” because it is not caused by the influenza virus.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?
Symptoms usually begin 1-2 days following infection with a virus and may last for up to 10 days, depending on the cause of the illness.

• Symptoms often include abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, and/or diarrhea.
• Other symptoms may include fever, body aches, and headaches.

IS IT CONTAGIOUS?
Yes, viral gastroenteritis is very contagious!

• The viruses that cause gastroenteritis are spread through close contact with infected persons (ie. by sharing food, drinks, or eating utensils).
• Individuals may also become infected by consuming contaminated foods or beverages.

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?
• Viral gastroenteritis is diagnosed based upon a patient’s symptoms and physical examination findings.
• If bacteria or a parasite is suspected as the cause, stool studies can be sent for further testing. Specific materials and instructions for stool collection will be given to you.

HOW IS IT TREATED?
If a virus is the cause of infection, antibiotics will not be helpful. Other measures will be used to control symptoms while your body fights off the virus on its own.

The most important goal of treatment is preventing dehydration (fluid loss) and loss of important body chemicals known as electrolytes from vomiting and/or diarrhea. Dehydration can be serious if left untreated. The best way to prevent and treat dehydration is by drinking fluids and continuing to eat normally. If you are severely dehydrated, intravenous (IV) fluids may be administered in the clinic or emergency room.

- **HYDRATION**
  - First replace lost fluids and electrolytes with **non-caffeinated fluids** or an **oral rehydration solution (ORS)** approved by the World Health Organization (WHO).
    - Drink enough to satisfy thirst and to maintain a pale-colored urine.
    - If diarrhea or vomiting persist, rehydrate with an ORS after each episode.
  - For **mild diarrhea**, most healthy adults can stay hydrated with water, chicken broth, clear soups, popsicles, diluted juices, and sports drinks. Pedialyte is preferred over sports drinks like Gatorade because it contains less sugar (excess sugar can worsen diarrhea). Pedialyte powder packs are available for purchase through the Student Health Pharmacy.
  - For **moderate to severe diarrhea**, an ORS is preferred. An ORS should also be used in those with underlying medical conditions, the elderly, and children.
  - WHO Oral Rehydration Salts can be purchased worldwide. They are available at REI Outfitters and www.amazon.com as “Adventure Medical Kits Oral Rehydration Salts”.
  - You can make your own ORS by mixing 1/2 teaspoon of salt, 6 teaspoons of sugar, and 1 liter of water.
**DIET**

- Eating a regular diet early has been shown to reduce illness duration. After taking an ORS, try small portions of foods that are normally in your diet. You do not need to limit your diet to clear liquids or the BRAT diet (see below) as previously recommended.
- If you are unable to tolerate a regular diet, try foods that are easy on the stomach, like:
  - The BRAT diet (bananas, rice, applesauce, toast), yogurt, oatmeal, jello, etc.
  - Bland foods (boiled/baked potatoes, boiled carrots, boiled/baked skinless chicken, etc.)

**MEDICATIONS**

- **Acetaminophen (Tylenol)** can be taken for fever and muscle aches.
  - You may take up to a maximum of 1000mg every 6-8 hours if you do not have any known liver problems. Avoid alcohol when taking acetaminophen.
  - Ibuprofen (Advil or Motrin) and aspirin are best avoided as they can irritate the lining of the stomach.
- **Loperamide (Imodium)** can be taken for 1-2 days to treat diarrhea as long as you are not running a high fever (>101°F), and there is no blood or mucus in your stool.
  - The dosage is 2 tablets (4 mg total) initially, followed by 1 tablet (2 mg) after each unformed stool. Do not take more than 8 tablets (16 mg total) in 24 hours.
  - You should stop taking Imodium and see a healthcare provider if your diarrhea lasts for more than 48 hours.
- **Bismuth (Pepto-Bismol)** is a safe alternative to loperamide in patients with bloody diarrhea. Do not take bismuth with aspirin or if you are allergic to aspirin.
- **Anti-nausea medications** may also be prescribed if needed.
- **Probiotics** may shorten the course of diarrhea. Studies have shown improved recovery in children, but further studies in adults are still pending.
- **Antibiotics** may be prescribed if a bacterial cause is suspected or confirmed.

**TO AVOID SPREADING THE INFECTION TO OTHERS:**

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water, especially after using the toilet and before touching food.
  - Proper technique is important! After wetting your hands with soap and water, rub them together for 15-30 seconds (about the time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday" twice).
  - Pay special attention to the fingernails, the skin between the fingers, and the wrists.
  - Remember to rinse and dry thoroughly.
- Do not share food or drink with anyone.
- Avoid sharing bathrooms if possible. Disinfect surfaces with a chlorine bleach cleaner.
- Wash dirty clothing, towels, and linens promptly.

**CONSULT YOUR HEALTHCARE PROVIDER IMMEDIATELY IF YOU:**

- Cannot keep liquids down for more than 24 hours.
- Have a fever of 100.4°F or higher.
- Have more than 10 stools/day or a feeling of always needing to go to the bathroom.
- Have bloody emesis or diarrhea.
- Have worsening or persistent abdominal pain.
- Have symptoms lasting more than 7 days.
- Have signs of dehydration, including dry mouth, no tears, less need to urinate, or feeling faint.
- Have traveled recently outside the country.
- Have used antibiotics recently.
- Are pregnant.
- Have a weak immune system (eg. from HIV, chemotherapy, uncontrolled diabetes, etc.).

**RECOMMENDED WEBSITES:**

- [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)
- [www.mayoclinic.com](http://www.mayoclinic.com)
- [travel.gc.ca/travelling/health-safety/rehydration](http://travel.gc.ca/travelling/health-safety/rehydration)