



Leaflet: Gastroenteritis in Adults

Gastroenteritis in Adults

Gastroenteritis occurs when the guts (intestines) become infected. Many bacteria, viruses and other microbes (germs) can cause it. It can range from a mild stomach upset for a day or two with some mild diarrhoea to severe vomiting and diarrhoea for several days or longer.

What are the symptoms of gastroenteritis?

- ◆ Sometimes vomiting is the main symptom. Sometimes it is diarrhoea. Sometimes it is both.
- ◆ Crampy pains in the abdomen (tummy) are common. Pains may ease each time some diarrhoea is passed.
- ◆ High temperatures (fever) and headaches are common.

If vomiting occurs, it typically lasts a day or so. Diarrhoea often starts after any vomiting and may last several days. Loose motions (stools) can persist for a week or so before a normal pattern returns. See below for symptoms of complications.

How do you get gastroenteritis?

Sometimes it is caused from infected food (food poisoning). Sometimes it is just 'one of those bugs going about'. Infected water is a cause in some countries. Good hygiene helps prevent spread to other people. This includes washing hands after going to the toilet or before touching food.

What is the treatment for gastroenteritis?

- ◆ *Drinks* - have lots to drink. This is the most important part of treatment. 'Little but often' may be better than trying to drink full cups. The aim is to avoid dehydration which is the main complication. This is more of a problem if vomiting as well as diarrhoea persists. Even if there is vomiting or nausea (feeling sick) it is important to take frequent sips as some will still be absorbed. Ideally, fruit juices should be included as these have some sugar in them. However, any drink is better than non.
- ◆ *Rehydration drinks* - may be advised. They are used if there is a concern about dehydration. They can be taken instead of, or in addition to, normal drinks. They are made from sachets available from pharmacies. For example, Dioralyte, Rehidrat, and Electrolade are common brands and come in different flavours. 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 added from the sachets helps the water to be absorbed better into the body from the gut. They do not stop or reduce diarrhoea but are the best drinks to prevent or treat dehydration. Make up these drinks exactly as instructed on the packet. Home made salt drinks are not advised as the quantity of salt has to be exact to be of benefit and to avoid problems.
- ◆ *Eat as normally as possible* . It used to be advised to 'starve' for a while but this is now known to be wrong advice. However, you may not feel like food if you are vomiting or feeling sick. This is fine and, as a rule, let your appetite be your guide. Although you cannot do without fluid, you can do without food for several days. Start to eat as soon as your appetite returns. Salty soups (to replace salt lost in diarrhoea) and foods high in carbohydrate such as bread or pasta are best to start with.
- ◆ *Anti-diarrhoeal medicines* - are not usually advised. Plenty to drink and a 'let it out' approach is often all that is required. However, limiting the number of toilet trips may be desirable if diarrhoea persists. Several medicines are available from the pharmacy. Possibly the safest and most effective is loperamide. The dose of this is 2 capsules at first followed by 1 capsule after each motion. Maximum 8 in 24hrs. (These medicines should not be given to young children).
- ◆ *Paracetamol* - is useful for high temperatures or headaches. An adult dose is 2 tablets every 4-6 hrs (maximum of 8 in 24hrs).
- ◆ *Antibiotics* - are rarely needed. They may be prescribed if symptoms are severe

Are there any complications?

Most people with gastroenteritis recover quickly. Vomiting usually settles within 1 to 2 days but diarrhoea may last for longer. Dehydration is the most common complication but is unlikely to occur if you have plenty to drink. Dehydration may be developing if you drink little, pass little urine, becomes drowsy with a dry mouth and tongue. See a doctor if you suspect dehydration is developing. The following symptoms may also indicate a more serious illness.

- ◆ Persistent vomiting.
- ◆ Blood in vomit or diarrhoea.
- ◆ Diarrhoea not beginning to settle after several days.
- ◆ Pains getting worse.
- ◆ Drowsiness or confusion.
- ◆ Infections caught abroad.

See a doctor if these or any other symptoms occur that you are concerned about.

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