

Viral Gastroenteritis

What is it?

- Gastroenteritis means inflammation of the stomach and small and large intestines.
- Viral gastroenteritis is an infection caused by a variety of viruses that result in vomiting and/or diarrhea.
- It is often called the “stomach flu” although it is not caused by the influenza virus.

What causes viral gastroenteritis?

- Many different viruses can cause gastroenteritis, including rotavirus and norovirus.
- Your doctor can determine if the diarrhea is caused by a virus or by something else, such as bacteria, parasites and medications or medical conditions.

What are the symptoms of viral gastroenteritis?

- Symptoms of viral gastroenteritis include watery diarrhea, nausea and/or vomiting and abdominal cramps.
- Headache, muscle aches and low grade fever may be present.
- Symptoms usually begin 1 to 3 days after infection and may last as long as 10 days, depending on which virus is responsible.

How does viral gastroenteritis spread?

- Viral gastroenteritis is easily spread. Close contact with infected individuals, especially those that do not wash their hands regularly after using the bathroom, is a common way of spreading the virus.
- Foods or beverages contaminated with the virus by infected persons can be another source of infection.
- The virus can survive on surfaces and objects for days.

Is there treatment for viral gastroenteritis?

- There is no treatment that targets the virus itself.
- The number one way of treating viral gastroenteritis in children and adults is fluid replacement to prevent dehydration.
- Your physician may give you specific instructions about what kinds of fluid to take and other general advice.

How can viral gastroenteritis be prevented?

- Individuals can reduce their chances of getting infected by frequent hand washing, immediate disinfection of contaminated surfaces with household disinfectants, and prompt washing of soiled articles of clothing.
- At home, use separate personal items such as towels, eating utensils, glasses and plates.
- If food or water is thought to be contaminated, it should be avoided.



This fact sheet provides basic general information only and is to be used as a quick guide, not as a complete resource on the subject. If you have any further questions, ask Infection Prevention & Control or your health care provider.