



## What is viral gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis is a set of symptoms more commonly known as the “stomach flu”.

## What causes viral gastroenteritis?

Several highly infectious viruses cause viral gastroenteritis. Norwalk virus, or norovirus, is the most common in adults and rotavirus is most common in children. Other viruses that cause viral gastroenteritis are adenoviruses and astroviruses. All gastrointestinal viruses are very tiny and found in the vomit and stool of infected people.

## What are the symptoms of viral gastroenteritis?

Symptoms usually appear suddenly, within 10 to 48 hours of exposure. Symptoms include:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Abdominal pains
- Muscle aches
- Headache
- Low-grade fever
- General feeling of weakness or being unwell (malaise)

Viral gastroenteritis usually runs its course in one to two days. Contact your doctor if symptoms last longer than three days or become more severe. Children infected with viral gastroenteritis often vomit more than adults.

## Is viral gastroenteritis contagious?

Viral gastroenteritis is very contagious and easily spread through stool and vomit. Special care should be taken when changing the diapers of children with viral gastroenteritis. People with viral gastroenteritis are contagious from the moment symptoms begin until two days after diarrhea stops.

## How is viral gastroenteritis spread?

Viral gastroenteritis is usually spread through the fecal-oral route (unwashed hands). It can also spread through airborne droplets from coughing and sneezing. The most common ways to catch the virus are:

- Eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated with the virus
- Touching surfaces or objects contaminated with the virus, then placing your hands in your mouth
- Caring for someone with the illness, or sharing foods or eating utensils with someone who is infected

OVER ►

## Are there any complications?

- Severe dehydration is a common complication that can happen very quickly in small children, babies, and the elderly
- If symptoms worsen, seek immediate medical attention

## What is the treatment for viral gastroenteritis?

Antibiotics kill bacteria only and do not work on viruses like gastroenteritis. Currently there are no antiviral medications used to treat viral gastroenteritis. Dehydration can happen quickly with vomiting and diarrhea. It is important to replace lost fluids. Take small sips of water or an oral replacement solution like Pedialyte. Do not drink sport drinks. They do not replace the nutrients and minerals lost during the illness. Pop and juice are not recommended by the Canadian Paediatric Society. After vomiting has stopped for six hours, bland foods can be eaten. The BRAT diet is the most easily tolerated.

**BRAT** stands for:

Bananas,  
Rice  
Applesauce  
Toast

## Can viral gastroenteritis be prevented?

Frequent hand washing with soap and warm water, especially after using the toilet and before eating, are the best ways to prevent any infection. Use a tissue or sleeve to cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing.

---

### References:

1. Heymann, D (editor). (2004) *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual*. 18<sup>th</sup> Edition. Washington D.C.: American Public Health Association.
2. Canadian Paediatric Society (n.d.) Oral rehydration therapy and early refeeding in the management of childhood gastroenteritis. Retrieved: June 30 2005, from <http://www.cps.ca/english/statements/N/n94-03.htm>
3. Canadian Paediatric Society (2003, July 25) *Dehydration and diarrhea*. Retrieved June 30, 2005 from <http://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/babies/dehydration.htm>
4. Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (2005, September 14) *Norovirus Q&A*. Retrieved July 8, 2005 from <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/revb/gastro/norovirus-qa.htm>

July 2005 – k.c

---

#### Windsor Office:

1005 Ouellette Avenue  
Windsor, Ontario  
(519) 258-2146  
Fax: 258-6003

#### Leamington Office:

215 Talbot Street East  
Leamington, Ontario  
(519) 326-5716  
Fax: 326-4642

#### Essex Office:

360 Fairview Avenue West  
Suite 215, Essex, Ontario  
(519) 776-5933  
Fax: 776-6102