

Gastroenteritis

What is gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis is a condition that causes inflammation of the stomach and the small and large intestines. Any person can get gastroenteritis and most recover completely. Often caused by a virus, common symptoms include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal cramping. Complications are uncommon, but there is a risk of becoming dehydrated due to excessive fluid loss through diarrhea or vomiting. Symptoms of dehydration are lightheadedness, dizziness, dry lips and mouth, decreased urination, increased pulse, and fatigue. Treatment for gastroenteritis consists of self-care strategies to address any associated symptoms (note: antibiotics are not effective for cases of viral gastroenteritis). In addition to getting plenty of rest, below are some tips on how to feel better based on the symptoms experienced:

Nausea and vomiting

- Rehydrate by taking small frequent sips of room temperature beverages such as water, non-citrus juices diluted with water, or herbal teas. Avoid sweet beverages, since these can cause dehydration. Using an oral rehydration solution that can be purchased at the pharmacy may also be an option.
- Eat foods as tolerated, keeping in mind the list of foods to avoid below.
- Some suggestions of tolerable foods to eat include: toast, crackers, pretzels, potatoes, noodles, rice, melons, bananas, peaches, pears, low-fat breads and grains, fish, chicken, turkey, soups, herbal teas, non-citrus juices, and water.

Diarrhea

- Adequate nutrition is vital. Drinking fluids for a short time may be in order if you do not have an appetite or are very nauseated.
- If you have watery diarrhea, eating carbohydrates or starches with salt are recommended.
- Over-the-counter medications to reduce the frequency of diarrhea are available and safe if you do not have fever, abdominal pain, or bloody stools. It is advised that bismuth subsalicylate (brand names: Pepto Bismol, Kaopectate) not be used by anyone under the age of 18 or by those who are pregnant. Loperamide (brand name: Immodium) is a stronger antidiarrheal medication; it is advised that people use it sparingly and as needed because it can cause constipation (avoid taking more than 2 doses).

Foods to avoid

- Avoid alcohol, spicy foods, greasy foods, dairy products, caffeine, citrus fruits and juices, chocolate, tomatoes, oils, and creamed foods or soups.
- Eat small portions frequently. A large meal may increase nausea and abdominal cramping.
- Some people may find that they have a temporary lactose intolerance for up to several weeks after the diarrhea has resolved.

When should I see a health care provider?

Symptoms will likely lessen with each day. However, if diarrhea continues without lessening, if you are vomiting for more than 2 days, have abdominal pain (with or without fever), bloody stool, are feeling dizzy or lightheaded, or if you are not able to hold down fluids for over 24 hours, it is advised that you be re-evaluated.

How can I prevent the spread of gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis is very contagious, especially if caused by a virus. Proper hygiene is essential and handwashing is the single most effective way to prevent the spread of viruses. After using the toilet and prior to food preparation and eating, make sure to wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If using a shared bathroom, keep personal items separate and use a disinfectant cleanser daily on hard contact surfaces.

Online & Off-Campus Resources

Go Ask Alice!: goaskalice.columbia.edu

On-Campus Resources

Medical Services: 212-854-7426
health.columbia.edu/medical-services

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