

## **GASTROENTERITIS**

Gastroenteritis is a gut infection usually caused by a bug. It is commonly called gastro, food poisoning, tummy bug, intestinal or stomach flu. With gastroenteritis, your stomach and intestines become irritated from the infection.

These bugs are usually a virus, bacteria or parasite. These bugs can all result in gastroenteritis:

Virus	Bacteria	Parasite
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Norovirus</li><li>- Rotavirus</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Campylobacter</li><li>- Salmonella</li><li>- E.coli (VTEC/STEC)</li><li>- Yersinia</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Giardia</li><li>- Cryptosporidium</li></ul>

Infants and young children, older people, and people with a weakened immune system are most at risk of getting a severe bout of gastroenteritis.

### **What are the symptoms?**

Main symptoms are diarrhoea (runny, watery poo) and vomiting but you may also develop stomach pain, cramping, fever, nausea, loss of appetite and headaches. Depending on the cause (type of bug), symptoms may appear within a few hours to a couple of weeks after infection/exposure to the bug. The illness can range from mild to severe. Symptoms usually last one or two days, but some people may be unwell for longer.

### **How is it spread?**

People become infected when they swallow the bug (virus, bacteria or parasite). This can occur by eating contaminated food, drinking contaminated water or touching your mouth with contaminated hands. Other examples of how people come in contact with these bugs include handling raw meat, eating contaminated raw meat or undercooked food, consuming raw milk products, drinking untreated water, touching contaminated objects or surfaces (taps, towels, utensils, door handles), having direct contact when cleaning up vomit or diarrhoea of a sick person or animal.

### **What is the treatment?**

Most people with gastroenteritis recover within a few days without needing medical treatment, as long as they don't become dehydrated.

Diarrhoea and vomiting can easily cause dehydration, where your body doesn't have enough fluid to function properly. Signs of dehydration include dry skin, dry mouth, feeling lightheaded, and being really thirsty. To prevent dehydration, drink plenty of water and other fluids. Clear fluids, such as water and diluted cordials are best. Ice blocks are a good way of getting fluids into children.

You have a higher risk of becoming dehydrated if you have severe, prolonged diarrhoea or vomiting and cannot drink enough fluid. People most at risk of dehydration are:

- older and frail people or people who have a weakened immune system
- pregnant people
- young tamariki (children).

You should go to see your healthcare provider if:

- you are in one of the groups above most at risk of dehydration
- you are vomiting a lot and cannot keep fluids down
- you have blood in your diarrhoea or vomit
- you have severe stomach pain
- your symptoms are severe and getting worse
- your symptoms are not going away after 3 or 4 days
- you have recently travelled abroad.

If you need to visit your healthcare provider, always tell them about your symptoms in advance. This is so they can put measures in place to stop other people being infected.

Some people with gastroenteritis caused by bacteria or parasite may be given antibiotics. Antibiotics are not effective for viral gastroenteritis.

### **Avoid spreading gastroenteritis**

Stay away from work or school for at least 48 hours after your symptoms have gone away, especially if you:

- prepare or handle food
- work in a healthcare or early childhood facility
- have contact with potentially vulnerable people.

You should wait for at least 2 weeks after the last episode of diarrhoea before you go swimming in a pool.

If someone in your home, workplace or education facility has gastro, to prevent spread:

- regularly clean and disinfect surfaces, rooms and affected areas, especially frequently touched surfaces or objects, and bathrooms and toilets.
- keep spaces well-ventilated by opening windows and doors several times a day to increase fresh air flow.

### **Preventing gastroenteritis**

To guard against gastro, it is important to wash your hands with soap and water, and dry your hands thoroughly, especially:

- before eating or preparing food
- after going to the toilet
- when changing nappies
- after contact with an infected person.

### **Food safety**

Food safety is always important, but especially in hot weather.

- Make sure you wash your hands before cooking.
- Keep food refrigerated properly where possible.
- Do not leave food out for too long.
- Make sure meat and fish are properly cooked before eating.
- Keep surfaces and utensils clean.

### **What is the role of Waikato Public Health Unit?**

Waikato Public Health Unit is notified of gastroenteritis in some cases – for example, where there is a known bug, suspected common source, or where the person is in a high-risk occupation, such as a food handler or an early childcare worker. We then monitor the number of people who have the illness and give health professionals advice on how to reduce its spread in the community.

### **More information**

For more information about gastroenteritis contact your doctor or Health Protection Officer from the Waikato Public Health Unit, (Telephone 07 8382569 or toll – free 0800 805 977). If you are concerned about your health, call Healthline on 0800 611 116 or see your doctor.