

## Gastroenteritis ("Stomach Flu")

You were feeling fine, but suddenly everything changed. Your stomach, your guts, your head, your body – everything started to rebel. Your world shrinks to the path from your bed to the bathroom and back. You have gastroenteritis.

### What is gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis is an irritation and inflammation of the stomach lining and intestines that causes vomiting and/or diarrhea. In most cases, it is caused by a virus (in the U.S., usually a member of the norovirus family). Bacteria, toxins, and parasites also can cause gastroenteritis. People often attribute the cause to "something I ate;" however, true food poisoning is a rare occurrence. Illnesses with these symptoms are commonly referred to as "stomach flu;" but it is not really the flu and is not caused by an influenza virus.

### How do people get infected?

Gastroenteritis can be very contagious. Direct contact with a person who is infected can be a prime route for infection. Eating or drinking contaminated food and water, or touching contaminated surfaces or objects, and then touching your hand to your face can spread infection.

### What are the symptoms?

Gastroenteritis usually is not "serious," although people who are sick with it might not agree. Symptoms usually come on suddenly. People often feel very sick with:

- nausea
- vomiting
- watery non-bloody diarrhea with stomach cramps

There may also be:

- chills
- headache
- low-grade fever
- muscle aches
- general sense of tiredness

Viral infections can last from a few hours to several days. On average they last 24 to 48 hours. Illness caused by other organisms, such as bacteria or parasites, can last over a week.

### Is there any treatment?

Unfortunately, antibiotics are ineffective against viral illnesses. They may help in the case of bacterial illness, but in some cases antibiotics can make symptoms worse. People usually get better without medical treatment in 1 to 3 days. Because there is a risk for dehydration due to vomiting and diarrhea, it is very important to drink to replenish fluids. Review our suggestions for reducing symptoms and recovering from vomiting and/or diarrhea (on back).

### When should I call for help?

If your symptoms persist or worsen, you have a fever over 100.5 degrees, or you have any questions or concerns about your health, please consult with a health care provider who can evaluate your condition and make recommendations about the care you need. Students may call 607 255-5155 to talk with a Gannett nurse 24/7.

### What about prevention?

You can decrease your (and others') chance of getting sick by following these self-care steps:

- Wash your hands – frequently – with soap and water (alcohol-based hand sanitizers may be a helpful addition, but should not be used as a substitute in the case of gastroenteritis). Germs live in bathrooms, on door knobs, railings, countertops, desks, phones, etc., so take care to clean those germs off your hands.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth. Germs move easily from surfaces to hands to these gateways into the body.
- Don't share eating and drinking utensils, lip balms, etc.
- Avoid close contact with people who are sick. When you are sick, keep your distance from others.
- Stay home from classes, work, social gatherings, errands, and non-essential activity when you are sick.
- Thoroughly clean and disinfect contaminated surfaces immediately after an episode of vomiting or diarrhea by using a bleach-based household cleaner.
- Immediately remove clothing or linens that may be contaminated after an episode of illness. Wash them using hot water and soap.
- Take care of your immune system by eating well, getting enough sleep, engaging in physical activity, and managing stress.



## Self-care for vomiting

Vomiting is caused by a wide variety of illnesses and medical conditions. Here are some general tips to help your body recover:

*After vomiting:* wait 2 hours for your stomach to settle before swallowing any liquids. (You may rinse your mouth with water right after vomiting but don't swallow).

*After your stomach settles:* start by taking 1 to 2 teaspoons of clear liquid then, every 15 or 20 minutes, increase the amount slowly. This will help to prevent dehydration.

### Clear liquids include:

- **Pedialyte** (available at the Gannett Pharmacy and in the infant section of grocery stores) is a balanced salt solution that replaces lost fluids using just a small amount of sugar. It's very bitter, but tastes better if you add a flat ginger ale to it.
- **Oral rehydration salts** (available at the Gannett Pharmacy) are specially formulated to help replace lost salts and avoid dehydration.
- **Flat ginger ale or cola** with bubbles stirred out
- **Diluted (50/50) "Gatorade-type" sports drinks** are not as effective as Pedialyte, but better than other sugary type drinks
- **"Special Gatorade" (G2 and Propel)** are low sugar alternatives to regular Gatorade and they can use without diluting
- **VERY diluted clear juices and other sugary type drinks**, like apple juice or fruit punch (undiluted sugary beverages can aggravate diarrhea)
- **Freeze pops; popsicles** (cut off small chunks)
- **Water or ice chips** prevent dehydration, but do not replace lost salts, so re-hydration solutions are preferable for vomiting that lasts more than a day or two.

### What can I eat?

Once you've stopped vomiting for at least 6 hours and are holding down fluids, you should start out slowly by trying to eat bland foods. Consider the BRATS diet (see box on right).

### What if I still feel sick?

Seek medical attention if the advice on this page is not helping you feel better, or if you have experienced any of the following:

- been vomiting for more than 1 day
- had an extremely painful headache
- developed a rash, or
- had a significantly reduced amount of urine
- fever of over 100.5 degrees

### For medical attention:

**Call Gannett 24/7 at 607 255-5155 or consult another health care provider.**

## Self-care for diarrhea

Diarrhea is characterized by a significant increase in the frequency, or a significant decrease in the solidity of bowel movements. It has many causes, both infectious and non-infectious.

### What should I do?

- *If you have diarrhea with vomiting*, give priority to settling your stomach before tending to the diarrhea. When these symptoms are happening at the same time, you should be especially aware of the risk of dehydration. If you can't keep any liquids down and have not urinated for more than 8 hours, you should seek medical attention.
- *If you have diarrhea without vomiting*, you may not have to change your diet very much. You should drink plenty of fluids (see clear liquids information on left) to keep yourself hydrated. Stay away from greasy and spicy foods, full strength juices (the sugars make diarrhea worse), and other foods or drinks that have made previous episodes of diarrhea worse.

### What can I eat?

Stick to bland foods until you feel better. Consider the following diet:

#### BRATS diet:

**B** ananas, bread (to help replace potassium)

**R** ice, rice-based cereal, plain salted rice cakes

**A** pples, applesauce (unlike apple *juice*, these have pectin which tends to thicken bowel movements)

**T** oast (no butter, a small amount of jam or jelly is okay)

**S** altines or other crackers (to help replace lost sodium)

### What about diarrhea medicine?

There are non-prescription products, such as Imodium, Pepto-Bismol, and Kaopectate that can decrease the frequency or increase the density of bowel movements. However, it's best to consult with a health care provider before taking any of these products. Antidiarrheals sometimes can prolong an illness. If antidiarrheals *are* advised by your health care provider, you can find them at any pharmacy, including the Gannett Pharmacy.

NOTE: Pepto Bismol and Kaopectate can make stools dark black and cause the tongue to turn black. This is a normal response to the medication and not something to be concerned about.

Some studies have shown that taking Lactobacillus acidophilus (a normal intestinal bacteria), found in the health food section of many stores, can shorten the length of diarrheal illness.

### What if I still feel sick?

Seek medical attention if the advice on this page is not helping you feel better, or if you have experienced any of the following:

- diarrhea for more than 5 days
- severe abdominal cramping
- a fever for more than 2 days
- no urination in more than 8 hours
- seeing blood in the toilet
- recent international travel
- more than 5 episodes of diarrhea in a day