

Viral Gastroenteritis (Stomach Flu)

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

What is viral gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis means inflammation of the stomach and small and large intestines. Viral gastroenteritis is an infection caused by a variety of viruses that results in vomiting or diarrhea or both. It is often called the “stomach flu,” although it is not caused by the influenza viruses, and therefore is not prevented by a flu shot.

How do people get infected?

Direct contact with a person who is infected with the virus is a prime route for infection. It also happens when people touch surfaces or objects contaminated with the virus, and then touch their hand to their face.

What are the symptoms?

Stomach flu is usually not “serious,” although people who have it might not agree at the time. Symptoms usually come on suddenly. People often feel very sick with nausea, vomiting,

and/or watery non-bloody diarrhea with stomach cramps. Sometimes there is a low-grade fever. There may also be chills, headache, muscle aches, and a general sense of tiredness. Symptoms usually last 24 to 60 long hours.

And then, people get better and recover.

Is there any treatment?

Unfortunately, antibiotics don’t work against viral illnesses. People usually get better without medical attention in 1 to 3 days. However, there is a risk for dehydration due to vomiting and diarrhea; so, after vomiting has stopped for a couple of hours, it is important to drink to replenish fluids. Suggestions for reducing symptoms and recovering from vomiting and/or diarrhea are on page 2 of this flyer.

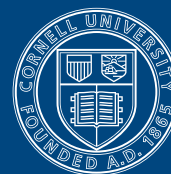
Some people with symptoms of stomach flu may actually have (or develop, in addition) another kind of infection.

If your symptoms persist or worsen, or if you have a fever over 100.5 degrees, please consult with a health care provider. We will 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 chance of coming into contact with the viruses that cause stomach flu and other infectious agents by following these self-care steps:

- Wash your hands—frequently—with soap and water or alcohol-based sanitizer. 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 contaminated 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 to protect them from getting sick too.
- 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 with virus after an episode of illness. Wash them using hot water and soap.
- Take care of your immune system by eating well, getting plenty of sleep, engaging in physical activity, and managing stress.



Self-care to recover from vomiting

Vomiting is one of the most unpleasant symptoms of stomach flu. In most cases, vomiting will stop without specific medical treatment.

Do not eat or drink anything for 2 hours after the last episode of vomiting to let your stomach settle. It may make you feel better to rinse your mouth right after vomiting, but don't swallow.

Introducing liquids

After a couple of hours, when you think your stomach has settled, start out by taking just 1 to 2 teaspoons of clear liquid. Every 15 to 20 minutes, increase the amount slowly. This will help to prevent dehydration.

Clear liquids include:

- Pedialyte (available at the Gannett Pharmacy) is a balanced salt solution that replaces lost fluids and has an appropriate (small) amount of sugar in it. It's very bitter, but tastes better if you add a flat ginger ale to it.
- Kaolectrolyte comes in powder packets mixes with water and has added Nutrasweet to help it taste better.
- Flat ginger ale or CocaCola (with bubbles stirred out).
- Gatorade-type sports drinks (not as good as Pedialyte/ Kaolectrolyte, but better than Kool-ade type drinks).
- Diluted Kool-ade type drinks.
- Very diluted clear juices, like apple juice (but be aware, undiluted juices can contribute to diarrhea).
- Freeze pops and popsicles (small bites)
- Bouillon soups
- Water (or ice chips): the ultimate "clear liquid" prevents dehydration, but does not replace lost salts.

Return to eating

Once you've stopped vomiting for at least 12 hours, you should start out slowly by trying to eat bland foods such as the "BRATS" diet:

Bananas, bread

Rice, rice cereal

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

Toast (no butter, small amount of jam or jelly ok)

Saltines or other crackers help replace lost salts

If you still feel sick ...

If you've tried to follow this advice, but you're not feeling better, or if you have:

- been vomiting for more than 1 day
- not urinated in more than 6 hours
- had an extremely painful headache
- developed a rash
- significantly reduced amount of urine

... you should seek medical attention:

Call Gannett (255.5155) or another health care provider.

Self-care to recover from diarrhea

Diarrhea is characterized by a significant increase in the frequency, or a significant decrease in the consistency of bowel movements. It is a common symptom of stomach flu and may be accompanied by cramping and urgency to get to a toilet.

If you have diarrhea with vomiting, you will need to 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 6 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 (water, sports drinks, or VERY diluted juices) 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 you remember have made previous episodes of diarrhea worse.

Sticking to bland foods may also help. The BRATS diet (described at left) would be a safe start.

Diarrhea medication

Non-prescription products, such as Immodium AD, Pepto-Bismol, and Kaopectate can decrease the frequency or increase the consistency of bowel movements. If you use this sort of preparation, always follow the package instructions. You can find these products at any pharmacy, including the Gannett Pharmacy.

Note: some of these products may turn stools dark black and can cause the tongue look black, as well. 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.

If you still feel sick ...

If you've tried to follow this advice, but it's not helping; if you have:

- diarrhea for more than 5 days
- more than 5 episodes of diarrhea in a day
- severe abdominal cramping
- a fever for more than 2 days
- not urinated in more than 6 hours
- seen blood in the toilet

...you should seek medical attention:

Call Gannett (255.5155) or another health care provider.