Gastroenteritis (diarrhoea and vomiting)

We have given you this factsheet because you may have gastroenteritis. Gastroenteritis is a very common condition which causes diarrhoea and vomiting.

Gastroenteritis in adults is often caused by a virus (stomach bug) called norovirus, also known as the winter vomiting bug. Norovirus is the most common stomach bug in the UK.

If you have ever had diarrhoea and vomiting for one to two days, it's likely that it was caused by norovirus. It is estimated that norovirus affects between 600,000 and a million people in the UK each year. It is most common in the winter months but can occur at any time of year.

Most cases of gastroenteritis in children are caused by a virus called rotavirus.

Who is at risk?

Viral gastroenteritis can affect people of all ages. Very young children and elderly people should take extra care if they become infected, as dehydration is more common in these age groups.

How does it spread?

Viral gastroenteritis spreads through:

- contact with an infected person
- consuming food or water contaminated with particles of the virus
- contact with surfaces or objects contaminated with particles of the virus
- swallowing the virus in the air after someone has had projectile vomiting
- (rarely) consuming raw or undercooked food (particularly shellfish which can be contaminated with raw sewage)

Outbreaks are most likely when people are confined near each other, such as in schools, hospitals, cruise ships, prisons, and similar settings.

What are the symptoms?

If you become infected with norovirus, you will start to notice symptoms about 12 to 48 hours later.

The main symptoms are:

- sudden onset of nausea and/or vomiting, which may be projectile
- diarrhoea, which is often watery

You may also have:

- a raised temperature (over 38°C or 100.4°F)
- headaches
- stomach cramps
- aching limbs

If you have symptoms of gastroenteritis

There is no specific treatment for gastroenteritis, apart from letting the illness run its course. You don't usually need medical attention unless your symptoms don't improve or there's a risk of a more serious problem.

- Drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration.
- If you feel like eating, eat foods that are easy to digest.
- If you are not in hospital, stay at home until your symptoms clear.

Symptoms usually last for 12 to 60 hours but can sometimes last longer. Most people make a full recovery within one to two days. However, some people (usually very young children or elderly people) may become very dehydrated and need hospital treatment.

Contact your general practitioner (GP) if:

- you are unwell at home and you have had diarrhoea for more than 7 days or vomiting for more than 2 days
- you already have a serious illness
- you are not sure what is causing your symptoms

Prevention

You can't always avoid getting gastroenteritis, but good hygiene including good hand washing can help to prevent the virus spreading.

If you are in hospital, report any diarrhoea and any vomiting to a member of staff immediately. Rigorous cleaning is the most effective way of removing contamination from the environment. We endeavour to clean wards and equipment to the highest standards.

- Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water after using the toilet and before handling or eating food. Soap and water are much more effective against these viruses than alcohol gel.
- If you are visiting a patient who is suffering from gastroenteritis, wash your hands with soap and water before you leave their room.

If you have gastroenteritis yourself, avoid spreading the infection to others.

- Avoid direct contact with other people or preparing food for others until at least 48 hours after your symptoms have gone. You may still be contagious, even though you no longer have sickness or diarrhoea.
- At home, flush away any infected faeces (poo) or vomit in the toilet and clean the surrounding toilet area.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces in bathrooms, kitchens and other areas that may be contaminated. Bleach-based household cleaners are most effective.
- Do not share towels and flannels with others.
- Wash any clothing or bedding that could have become contaminated with the virus separately from uncontaminated items, using a hot wash to ensure the virus is killed.
- Avoid visiting hospitals if you have had the typical symptoms of viral gastroenteritis in the past 72 hours (3 days). Norovirus is more serious and even more easily spread among people who are already ill.

If you have an appointment at the hospital, tell the department about your symptoms before you come in. They may need to rearrange your appointment.

Outbreaks of gastroenteritis

Gastroenteritis spreads easily in healthcare settings and can be difficult to control. Viruses like norovirus and rotavirus are easily introduced by infected patients, staff or visitors. These viruses can survive in the environment for many days and are likely to affect more than 50% of people who are exposed.

Patients affected in hospital are usually isolated for 48 to 72 hours after their symptoms have cleared. We may have to close affected wards, restrict visiting and enforce strict hygiene measures.

If there is an outbreak of gastroenteritis, you may find it useful to read our 'Diarrhoea and/or vomiting outbreak' leaflet. You can download it from **www.uhs.nhs.uk** or ask a member of staff for a copy.

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to a member of staff on the ward.

Useful links

www.nhs.uk/conditions/diarrhoea-and-vomiting

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For help preparing for your visit, arranging an interpreter or accessing the hospital, please visit **www.uhs.nhs.uk/additionalsupport**

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