

Fact Sheet: 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 virus that leads to vomiting and/or diarrhea. It is often called the “stomach flu” but is not caused by the influenza virus. Many different viruses can cause viral gastroenteritis, such as rotavirus, adenovirus, and norovirus.

Viral gastroenteritis is not caused by bacteria (such as Salmonella or E.coli), parasites (like Giardia), medications, or medical conditions even though symptoms may be similar. Your medical provider can determine if your gastroenteritis is caused by a virus or something else.

What are the symptoms?

- Watery diarrhea
- Nausea and vomiting
- Headache
- Low fever
- Stomach ache

Symptoms usually start 1 to 2 days after infection with a virus and may last 1 to 10 days depending on which virus caused the illness.

How is it spread?

The viruses are spread through close contact with infected persons (for example, by using the same bathroom, or by sharing food, water, or eating utensils). People may also become infected by eating or drinking foods or beverages contaminated with a virus.

How is it treated?

- Prevent severe loss of body fluids (dehydration).
- For children, an oral rehydration fluid such as Pedialyte, Ceralyte, or Oralyte can be used.
- Adults should drink clear liquids and avoid alcoholic and caffeinated beverages.

For most persons, viral gastroenteritis is not a serious disease, and people almost always recover completely. Gastroenteritis may be a serious illness for people who are unable to drink enough fluids to prevent dehydration, i.e. infants, young children, the elderly, people with disabilities, or those with a weakened immune system.

How is it prevented?

- Frequent hand washing.
- Proper food storage and preparation.
- Don't prepare food for others if you are ill.
- Cleaning contaminated surfaces with a bleach solution made of one part bleach to 10 parts water.
- Prompt washing of soiled clothing.
- If you are a food handler, health care professional, or daycare worker stay home until all symptoms have been gone for 72 hours.
- Rotavirus vaccine is available for infants aged 6 weeks to 32 weeks of age.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self -diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.

