Viral Gastroenteritis, Facts

Gastroenteritis is due to infection or inflammation of the stomach and small and large intestines. It is usually an infection caused by a virus. It results in vomiting or diarrhea. It is often called the "stomach flu". But it is not caused by the influenza viruses.

For most people, viral gastroenteritis is not serious. People who get it almost always recover completely without any long-term problems. But it is a serious illness for those who are unable to drink enough fluids to replace what was lost through vomiting or diarrhea. Those at risk for dehydration through loss of fluids include:

- Infants.
- Young children.
- Persons who are unable to care for themselves, such as the disabled or elderly.
- Immune compromised persons. They may get a more serious illness with greater vomiting or diarrhea. They may need to be hospitalized for treatment to correct or prevent dehydration.

Viral gastroenteritis affects people in all parts of the world. Each virus has its own seasonal activity. For example, in the United States, rotavirus and astrovirus infections occur during the cooler months of the year. Adenovirus infections occur throughout the year. Viral gastroenteritis outbreaks can occur in settings such as:

- Schools.
- Child care facilities.
- Nursing homes.
- Banquet halls.
- Cruise ships.
- Dormitories.
- Campgrounds.

CAUSES

Many different viruses can cause gastroenteritis. These include:

- Rotaviruses.
- Adenoviruses.
- Caliciviruses.
- Astroviruses.
- Norwalk virus.
- A group of Noroviruses.

Viral gastroenteritis is **not** caused by:

- Bacteria (such as Salmonella or Escherichia coli).
- Parasites (such as Giardia).
- Medications.
- Other medical conditions though the symptoms may be similar.

Food may be contaminated by food preparers or handlers who have viral gastroenteritis, especially if they do not wash their hands regularly after using the bathroom. Shellfish may be contaminated by sewage. Persons who eat raw or undercooked shellfish harvested from contaminated waters may get diarrhea. Drinking water can also be contaminated by sewage and spread these viruses.

Viral gastroenteritis is contagious. The viruses that cause gastroenteritis are spread through close contact with infected persons by sharing:

- Food.
- Water.
- Eating utensils.

Individuals may also become infected by eating or drinking contaminated foods or beverages.

SYMPTOMS

The main symptoms are watery diarrhea and vomiting. The affected person may also have:

- A headache.
- Fever.
- A stomach ache.
- Muscle aches.

The symptoms usually begin 1 to 2 days after infection. It may last for 1 to 10 days depending on which virus causes the illness. Your caregiver can determine if the diarrhea is caused by a virus or by something else.

DIAGNOSIS

Viral gastroenteritis is usually diagnosed by a caregiver based on the symptoms and medical examination of the patient. Rotavirus infection can be diagnosed by laboratory testing of a stool specimen. Tests to detect other viruses that cause gastroenteritis are not in routine use. Tests may be needed to exclude other diseases.

Viral gastroenteritis occurs in people of all ages and backgrounds. But some viruses tend to cause diarrhea among people in specific age groups. Rotavirus infection is the most common cause of diarrhea in:

- Infants.
- Young children under 5 years old.

Norwalk and Noroviruses are more likely to cause diarrhea in:

- Older children.
- Adults.

Adenoviruses and astroviruses cause diarrhea mostly in young children. But older children and adults can also be affected.

TREATMENT

The most important part of treating viral gastroenteritis in children and adults is to prevent severe loss of fluids *(dehydration)*. This treatment should begin at home. Your caregiver may give you specific instructions about what kinds of fluid to give. CDC recommends that families with infants and young children keep a supply of oral rehydration solution (*ORS*) at home at all times. Use the solution when diarrhea first occurs in the child. ORS is available at pharmacies without a prescription. Follow the written directions on the ORS package. And use clean or boiled water. Medications, including antibiotics (which have no effect on viruses), and medicines to stop diarrhea should be avoided unless specifically recommended by a caregiver.

There is a vaccine available for infants to prevent Rotavirus. Ask your caregiver if this is appropriate for your child.

PREVENTION

Persons can reduce their chance of getting infected by:

- Frequent hand washing.
- Prompt disinfection of contaminated surfaces with household chlorine bleach-based cleaners.
- Prompt washing of soiled articles of clothing.
- Avoiding food or water that is thought to be contaminated.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Drink plenty of clear fluids (water, apple juice, diluted tea). If nausea, stomach cramps or diarrhea are severe, you should start with clear liquid sips, frequently. Slowly increase the amount of fluid given each time, as diarrhea clears. Get plenty of rest. Wash hands thoroughly after using the bathroom to prevent spread to other household members. Do not share towels, utensils, or food.
- Only take over-the-counter or prescription medicines for pain, discomfort, or fever as directed by your caregiver.
- Use any medications as prescribed. Do not use other medications without discussing with your caregiver.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You are unable to hold down liquids.
- You become lightheaded.
- You do not begin to recover within 1-2 days.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You develop vomiting that does not stop.
- You have blood or coffee-ground appearing material in the material that you vomit.
- You develop blood in your stool, or dark black tarry stool.
- You develop persistent severe abdominal pain.

Information courtesy of the CDC.

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