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Viral Gastroenteritis

What is viral gastroenteritis?

Viral gastroenteritis is an infection that can cause diarrhea and vomiting. It happens when a person's stomach and intestines get infected with a virus. Both adults and children can get viral gastroenteritis.

People can get the infection if they:

- Touch an infected person or a surface with the virus on it, and then don't wash their hands
- Eat foods or drink liquids with the virus in them. If people with the virus don't wash their hands, they can spread it to food or liquids they touch.

What are the symptoms of viral gastroenteritis?

The infection causes diarrhea and vomiting. People can have either diarrhea or vomiting, or both. These symptoms usually start suddenly, and can be severe.

Viral gastroenteritis can also cause:

- A fever
- A headache or muscle aches
- Belly pain or cramping
- A loss of appetite

If you have diarrhea and vomiting, your body can lose too much water. This is called "dehydration." Dehydration can make you feel thirsty, tired, dizzy, or confused. It can also make your urine look dark yellow.

Severe dehydration can be life-threatening. Babies, young children, and elderly people are more likely to get severe dehydration.

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Do people with viral gastroenteritis need tests?

Not usually. Your doctor should be able to tell if you have it by learning about your symptoms and doing an exam. But they might do tests to check for dehydration or to see which virus is causing the infection. These tests can include:

- Blood tests
- Urine tests
- Tests on a stool sample

Is there anything I can do on my own to feel better or help my child?

Yes. People with viral gastroenteritis need to drink enough fluids so they don't get dehydrated.

Some fluids help prevent dehydration better than others:

- Older children and adults can drink sports drinks.
- You can give babies and young children an "oral rehydration solution," such as Pedialyte[®]. You can buy this in a store or pharmacy. If your child is vomiting, you can try to give your child a few teaspoons of fluid every few minutes.
- Babies who breastfeed can continue to breastfeed.

People with viral gastroenteritis should avoid drinks with a lot of sugar, like juice or soda. These can make diarrhea worse.

If you can keep food down, it's best to eat lean meats, fruits, vegetables, and whole-grain breads and cereals. Avoid eating foods with a lot of fat or sugar, which can make symptoms worse.

If you are an adult younger than 65 and you have a new bout of diarrhea, and no fever and no blood in your bowel movements, you can take medicine to stop diarrhea such as loperamide (Imodium[®]) for 1 to 2 days. But if you are older than 65, have a fever, or have blood in your bowel movements, do not take these medicines without checking with your doctor.

Do not give medicines to stop diarrhea to children.

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Should I call the doctor?

Call the doctor or nurse if you or your child:

- Has any symptoms of dehydration
- Has diarrhea or vomiting that lasts longer than a few days
- Vomits up blood, has bloody diarrhea, or has severe belly pain
- Hasn't had anything to drink in a few hours (for children), or in many hours (for adults)
- Hasn't needed to urinate in the past 6 to 8 hours (during the day), or if your baby or young child hasn't had a wet diaper for 4 to 6 hours

How is viral gastroenteritis treated?

Most people do not need any treatment, because their symptoms will get better on their own. But people with severe dehydration might need treatment with intravenous fluids. This involves getting fluids through an "IV" (a thin tube that goes into the vein).

Doctors do not treat viral gastroenteritis with antibiotics. That's because antibiotics treat infections that are caused by bacteria – not viruses. Taking antibiotics unnecessarily may make the diarrhea or other stomach symptoms worse.

Can viral gastroenteritis be prevented?

Sometimes. To lower the chance of getting or spreading the infection, you can:

- Wash your hands with soap and water after you use the bathroom or change your child's diaper, and before you eat.
- Avoid changing your child's diaper near where you prepare food.
- Make sure your baby gets the rotavirus vaccine. Vaccines can prevent certain serious or deadly infections. Rotavirus is a virus that commonly causes viral gastroenteritis in children.