

Gastroenteritis (tummy bug)

Information Sheet

What is it?

Gastroenteritis is commonly known as gastro or the tummy bug. Gastro is an infection and inflammation of the intestines (gut). There are many causes of gastro, including viruses such as *Norovirus* and *Rotavirus*; bacteria such as *Salmonella*; bacterial toxins such as Staphylococcal food poisoning; and parasites such as *Giardia*.

Gastro is common because the viruses, bacteria and parasites that cause it can be highly infectious, which means they are very easily spread from person-to-person and in contaminated food or water.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Symptoms of gastro include:

- diarrhoea, pronounced dy-a-rea (runny poo)
- vomiting.

You may also have stomach pains, fever and nausea (sickness in the stomach and an urge to vomit).

Depending on what has caused your gastro, symptoms usually last a day or two – however they could last up to a few months.

How serious is it?

Gastro is not usually serious and most people recover quickly without having to see a doctor. If the symptoms are severe, some people may need to be treated at hospital, particularly the very young and the elderly if they get dehydrated.

A person with gastro symptoms should see a doctor or nurse if they:

- are less than 6 months old
- have diarrhoea and stomach cramps for more than 24 hours or symptoms get worse
- have a high temperature, go pale or limp or are unusually tired, drowsy or irritable
- have blood, mucus or pus in their poo

- are not drinking fluids and show signs of dehydration, such as not weeing or only producing small amounts of dark wee and/or have a dry mouth
- have other health problems or symptoms.

If you have seen a doctor or nurse and your symptoms do not improve or get worse, you will need to see them again.

Acute gastro is gastro that happens suddenly. Acute gastro is a notifiable disease under the Health Act. This means that when acute gastro affects a group of people, or if you have gastro and are involved in a job where it could be easily spread, such as working with food, or in childcare or health care, your doctor must tell the District Health Board (DHB).

Who is most at risk?

You are more likely to get gastro if you:

- have contact with sick animals or people
- have poor hand hygiene or food hygiene
- drink raw milk or untreated water
- attend day care, school or live in a dormitory, hostel or rest home
- have a weak immune system, such as the young, elderly and people with severe medical conditions.

Children who are 5 years old and younger, adults over 65 years old and people with weak immune systems are more likely to have severe symptoms.

How could I get infected?

You get infected when you swallow the harmful bacteria, viruses, toxins and parasites or breathe-in the viruses. This can happen when you:

- touch contaminated surfaces or objects such as door handles and towels
- have contact with an infected person such as caring for them or eating from the same plate or cutlery as them

- have contact with infected farm animals or domestic pets
- consume contaminated food or drinks. Animals can contaminate water collected from roofs, bores, creeks, lakes and streams
- breathe-in small amounts of viruses released into the air when an infected person vomits.

The viruses, bacteria and parasites that cause gastro can be passed on to other people while they are still in your body and poo. The viruses, bacteria and parasites can stay in your body and poo for several days to several weeks after your symptoms stop.

How do I protect myself and others?

In general there is no vaccine to prevent gastro. However, young children can be protected against *Rotavirus* by immunisation. The vaccine is free in New Zealand for babies at their 6 week, 3 month and 5 month immunisations.

To avoid getting gastroenteritis:

- regularly wash your hands with soap and dry them thoroughly, especially after contact with animals, going to the toilet, changing a nappy, caring for a sick person and before preparing or eating food
- use household chlorine bleach mixed with water to disinfect surfaces and items that have touched poo or vomit
- get your shellfish from a safe supplier
- cook all food thoroughly to kill any viruses or bacteria
- only drink water that is treated and known to be safe. If you are not sure if the water is safe boil it first. If you have your own water supply, protect it from animal and bird poo and treat the water.

To avoid spreading gastro:

- regularly wash and dry your hands thoroughly
- open doors and windows to let fresh air into the room after vomiting
- use household chlorine bleach mixed with water to disinfect areas where vomit and poo

have spilled and clean any surfaces and items you use often

- if you need to visit your doctor tell the receptionist or nurse about your symptoms before you go so that they can decide if infection control measures need to be put in place
- avoid contact with children, adults over 65 years old and people with weakened immune systems until you have had no symptoms for 48 hours (2 days)
- do not prepare food for others until you have had no symptoms for 2 days
- do not go swimming in pools until you have had no symptoms for 2 weeks.

Will I need to take time off work, school or preschool?

Anyone with diarrhoea or vomiting should not go to work, school or day-care until they have had no symptoms for 2 days. This is especially important for food handlers, health care workers, childcare workers and children at school or day-care.

How is it treated?

Most people get better without needing medicine and can be looked after at home. It is important to rest and drink plenty of water to prevent dehydration.

Where can I get further information?

For more information on *Rotavirus* immunisation go to www.immune.org.nz.

For further information on gastro please contact your doctor or Hawke's Bay District Health Board Population Health on (06) 834 1815.

You can also phone Healthline on 0800 611 116 at any time of the day or night to speak to a registered nurse.

For more information about foodborne illness go to <http://www.foodsafety.govt.nz/>