

Gastroenteritis (Gastro)

COMMUNICABLE DISEASE CONTROL

Gastro is short for gastroenteritis, which is an infection of the gastrointestinal (or GI) tract. Sometimes people refer to it as “stomach flu” although it is not typically caused by the “flu” or influenza virus. This fact sheet explains some of the causes of gastro, how it is spread and how you can help stop the spread.

What are gastro symptoms?

Gastro symptoms can include diarrhea, stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, fever or feeling unwell. Symptoms may start quite slowly or come on suddenly. Gastro usually passes in less than 24 hours but can go on for several days.

Sometimes diarrhea is so severe that a person becomes very ill and loses large amounts of body fluids. At this point, the person should seek medical attention. The elderly and very young are most at risk. Other danger signs that need medical attention are high fever, severe abdominal pain, blood in your stool or severe weakness.

What causes gastro?

Gastro is caused by germs or their toxins. Although no amount of washing will remove them all, good hand washing will help.

The three major types of germs that cause gastro are **bacteria**, **viruses** and **parasites**. While most of these are usually harmless, many can cause illness in some situations.

Viruses

Viruses are a group of infectious particles that depend on other living cells to survive.

Some common viruses that cause gastro are:

- Rotavirus
- Norovirus (also called calicivirus)
- Hepatitis A virus

Bacteria

Bacteria are living single-celled germs that can be found almost everywhere.

Bacteria may cause gastro by releasing a toxin or by directly infecting our intestines.

Some of the most common bacterial causes of gastro include:

- Salmonella*
- E. coli*
- Staphylococcus*
- Shigella*
- Clostridium*, plus others.

Parasites

Parasites are tiny animals that can be single-celled or multicellular.

Some common causes of parasitic gastro include:

- Giardia*
- Cryptosporidium*
- Cyclospora*

How is gastro spread?

Germs that cause gastroenteritis are usually spread by contamination of something that goes in your mouth. This can occur by contact with contaminated objects, including food or water, or by contact with other people who are ill. Foods may be contaminated during or after preparation. Water can be contaminated by animal or human sewage, especially sources of drinking water such as private wells or water drawn from lake sources that do not have a treatment system. Even extremely tiny amounts of contamination can cause large outbreaks in some circumstances.

What can I do to help?

There are several ways to help: by helping yourself, by considering those around you and by assisting public health workers who investigate gastro outbreaks.

Help Yourself

Hand washing can help prevent you from getting gastro. If you do get it, the effects usually will get better without treatment. Keeping yourself hydrated by drinking clear fluids (like water, clear juices and soups), resting and eating easily digested foods (such as bananas, rice, crackers and soup) will help recovery. Danger signs include bloody stools, high fever or dehydration. Depending on what type of gastro you have, antibiotics or other medications may be needed. If you are unsure, contact your doctor or health care provider.

Consider Others

All people with gastro should wash their hands more frequently. This is especially important after going to the toilet and before handling food. It's important to realize that others can get sick from you. If you work in a job that involves food handling or close contact with others, such as in kitchens or restaurants, hospitals, daycares and personal care homes, you should not go to work while you are sick. Ask your employer or your local public health worker what you should do if you get gastro.

Assist Health Professionals

You may be asked by a health professional to help investigate gastro in yourself or in your community area. Health professionals may ask for help by conducting interviews and by asking for samples. Interviews will usually focus on your experiences with the illness and explore ways in which you might have caught it. Samples of stool or food and perhaps other samples are important to gastro investigations. Samples for germs degrade quickly with time, and the body will clear germs quickly as the immune system responds. Submitting samples quickly will therefore be very helpful.

What do test results mean?

Test results from food or stool samples are not straightforward. Negative (normal) test results do not mean that all is clear and positive (abnormal) results do not always explain the symptoms. You should discuss results with a health professional who knows your situation well. If more people are affected by the same gastro, health professionals may be aware of other facts that will be important to you.

For more information

If you have more questions about gastro or other illnesses, contact your doctor, public health nurse or call Health Links-Info Santé at 788-8200 in Winnipeg, toll free 1-888-315-9257; or visit the FightBAC! website at www.canfightbac.org. If you suspect an outbreak is occurring, call your local Regional Health Authority.

Local Public Health Unit Stamp