

Viral Gastroenteritis

(Diarrhoea and Vomiting)

What is viral gastroenteritis?

Viral gastroenteritis is an infection that causes inflammation of the stomach and intestines. A range of viruses can cause it (Norovirus being the most common).

Symptoms can include diarrhoea, vomiting, abdominal pain, headaches or a combination of any or all of these. Symptoms usually persist for 1-4 days, depending on the virus involved.

Is viral gastroenteritis a serious illness?

No, viral gastroenteritis is not usually a serious illness. However, dehydration from loss of fluids may occur in more vulnerable people, such as the elderly or very young. If symptoms are severe, hospital treatment may be required to correct the dehydration.

How is the infection treated?

Antibiotics must not be used in the treatment of viral gastroenteritis. The symptoms will resolve in time without treatment. When symptoms first develop, you may not want to eat. However, it is very important that you continue to drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration. Food can gradually be re-introduced when you feel able to tolerate it. If symptoms persist, medical advice should be sought.

Can the infection spread from person to person?

Viral gastroenteritis can spread very easily from person to person. Outbreaks of infection can occur in settings such as hotels, hospitals, schools and nursing homes where people share toilets and are in close contact with one another. Affected people are considered to be infectious until they have been free of any symptoms for 48 hours.

Can the spread of viral gastroenteritis be reduced?

The chances of spreading the virus can be reduced by:

- Making sure that everyone washes their hands properly after using the toilet and after having contact with anyone with symptoms.
- Keeping toilets and bathrooms thoroughly clean. Separate toilets will be designated for use by affected hospital patients.
- Isolating affected patients if an outbreak of infection occurs in hospital. It is very important that those patients who might have been affected do not have close contact with unaffected patients. For this reason, patients may be cared for in a single room or a designated bay on the ward until they have been free of symptoms for 48 hours.
- Keeping patients who have been exposed to infection away from those who have not for up to 72 hours. This will not stop patients from being discharged to their own homes but may delay transfer to other healthcare settings.

- Making sure that any visitors to an affected ward clean their hands, before and after going to see patients.
- Making sure that relatives and friends do not visit if they have symptoms of diarrhoea or vomiting themselves.
- Discouraging children and the very elderly from visiting wards during an outbreak.
- When a ward is affected by an outbreak of diarrhoea and vomiting visiting to the affected ward(s) is restricted to one visitor for a maximum of 2 separate 30 minute visits per day. In exceptional circumstances arrangements must be discussed with the matron or ward sister.
- Visitors should avoid eating or drinking on the ward and must wash their hands with soap and water prior to leaving.
- Visitors must be prepared for the fact that there is a possibility that they will also become infected. If visitors do develop symptoms of diarrhoea or vomiting, they must cease visiting and stay away from the hospital until they have been free of these symptoms for at least 48 hours.

The Trust cannot accept any responsibility for the accuracy of the information given if the leaflet is not used by RD&E staff undertaking procedures at the RD&E hospitals.

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