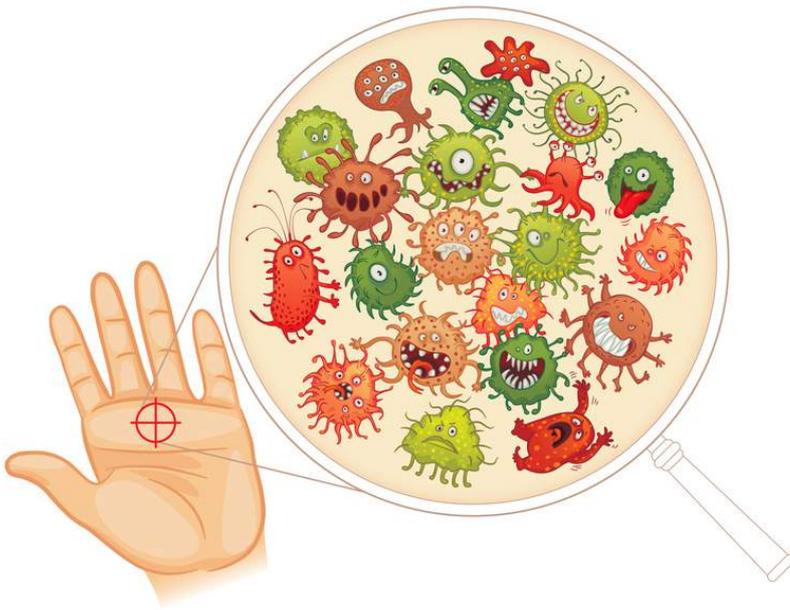


A young boy with dark hair is lying in bed, smiling broadly. He is wearing a maroon long-sleeved shirt. His hands are resting on his stomach. The bed has a yellow and orange patterned pillow and a white blanket. The background is a plain white wall.

Common Health Conditions series

Stomach Flu

Stomach flu commonly refers to diarrhea, abdominal cramps, nausea or vomiting; however, the term 'stomach flu' is a misnomer because flu is a respiratory infection affecting the lungs. Gastroenteritis is the medical term for stomach flu, indicating that the gastrointestinal tract (stomach and intestines) are inflamed. This can be caused by either bacteria, virus or parasites that enter the stomach and intestines, inflaming the linings of these organs.



Causes of Gastroenteritis

Bacteria, virus, parasites and toxins in food can cause gastroenteritis. Below are the more common causes and how they may be transmitted:

Bacteria, such as Staphylococcus, Escherichia coli., Salmonella, Listeria, Campylobacter and Shigella can be spread through food, contaminated dairy products, sharing of utensils or by contact.

Virus, such as norovirus, rotavirus, adenovirus, astrovirus and sapovirus can be found at confined places which one often touches, such as door knobs, handles or keyboards. It can also be spread by someone who prepares food without proper hand-washing after using the toilet. It is not necessary for someone to be visibly ill before being capable of spreading a virus. An adult may be infected with rotavirus, be well and unknowingly spread the virus to a child who put the object the infected adult touches into his mouth.

Parasites such as Giardia and cryptosporidium, Cryptosporidium and Entamoeba are often spread via polluted water.

Toxins such as aluminum, mercury and lead are found in contaminated water or seafood.

Other non-contagious causes such as drug, food allergies, laxatives and caffeine may also trigger inflammation of the gastrointestinal tract in some individuals. Taking too much antibiotics may also lead to bacteria overgrowth.

Symptoms of Gastroenteritis

Gastroenteritis is usually self-limiting, lasting about 2 to 5 days and the gastrointestinal tract fully recovering in the next few days after. Its symptoms are:

- Diarrhea
- Nausea
- Vomiting (less than 2 days)
- Abdominal cramps
- Bloating
- Mild fever or chills
- Muscle ache
- Fatigue

Should there be a fever higher than 38.3°C, bloody stools, dehydration or symptoms that last beyond 5 days, it indicates the presence of more severe disease that requires immediate doctor's consultation.



Who is at Risk of Gastroenteritis?

People who have a weaker immune system or who come into more frequent contact with bacteria, virus and parasites are at a higher risk of gastroenteritis. These include:

- Young children who are in close contact with other children in child care centres and schools, in particular those who have the habit of putting objects or fingers into the mouth.
- Elderly, especially those staying in nursing homes.
- People who are in confined places or frequently shake hands or come into close contact with others, such as in hostels or on ships.
- People with existing health conditions or taking drugs that suppress their immune system.



Complications and Prevention of Gastroenteritis

Prolonged vomiting or diarrhea can lead to dehydration, which may require hospitalization to replace the fluid and mineral loss. Signs of dehydration include low urine that is dark yellow, low blood pressure, dry or sticky mouth or no tears. In infants, sunken soft spots on the head is a sign of severe dehydration.

While it is impossible to create an environment free from bacteria, virus and parasites, we can be more vigilant about preventing contamination. For instance, wash hands with soap after using the toilet and before food preparation and consumption. Do not share towels or utensils with other family members. Limit touching surfaces or someone if you are infected and avoid preparing food until at least 3 days after recovery. The bacteria and virus can stay on surfaces for days, therefore if possible, disinfect the door knobs and common surfaces you have touched. For soiled clothing, use detergent and wash for a longer cycle. Avoid raw or undercooked foods, or unpasteurized milk and cheese which are more prone to certain bacteria.

Treatment of Gastroenteritis

Gastroenteritis that is mild may not recover medication and resting the gastrointestinal

tract can help with recovery. Keep hydrated and opt for easy to digest foods such as soda crackers and bananas. If drinking fluids result in more vomiting, take small sips or suck on popsicles. Consider fluids with minerals but avoid acidic juices like orange, caffeine and milk. Avoid also food that are spicy, fried or raw, and also fibrous foods that are difficult to digest.

Western medication to reduce vomiting, nausea or diarrhea may be prescribed but generally not recommended as gastroenteritis is self-limiting and oral prescription has side effects. Do not request an antibiotic as the cause of gastroenteritis may not be bacteria. Instead consuming antibiotics may reduce beneficial bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract.

On the other hand, TCM approaches is to regulate the motility of the stomach and intestines, improve gastrointestinal motion, reduce colonic movement and eliminate intestinal cramps via herbal massage, acupuncture or Chinese medicines, its focus is to enhance body immune system, so that the patient is less vulnerable to future gastroenteritis.

While gastroenteritis usually does not require treatment, be mindful of dehydration and complications, in particular for young children and the elderly.