

facts about...

# GASTROENTERITIS IN ADULTS

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### Gastroenteritis

**Gastroenteritis (Gastro) is an illness which may cause some or all of the following symptoms:**

- diarrhoea (watery frequent bowel actions)
- stomach pains
- vomiting (being sick)
- nausea (feeling sick)
- fever
- headache

The germs which cause gastro get into your body through your mouth, often in food or water and it can take several days for symptoms to appear. Sometimes symptoms may occur within hours of the germs entering your body, but it is usually longer.

When people get gastro they often assume that the last meal they ate gave them food poisoning. However, this is often not the case, and it might be food that they ate a couple of days before that caused it.



### What causes gastro and how is it spread?

The most common germs that cause gastroenteritis are bacteria, viruses and certain parasites. They may come from the soil, or from the bowel motions or body secretions of wild and pet animals including birds, or from humans.

Unclean food preparation (not washing hands, contamination) or storage (not refrigerating food quickly and properly) allows germs to spread or grow and often contributes to gastro transmitted by food.

**THE GERMS WHICH CAUSE GASTRO get into your body through your mouth, often in food or water and it can take several days for symptoms to appear.**

**Gastro occurs when these germs are taken in by mouth and this may happen in any of the following ways:**

- From person to person. This may occur directly by close personal contact or contact with the bowel motions of an infected person, or indirectly by touching surfaces such as taps, toilet flush handles, children's toys and nappies that have been contaminated with the germs
- Eating food that has been contaminated with the germs
- Drinking contaminated water
- Airborne infection by exposure to infected people who are vomiting, coughing and sneezing (mainly viruses).



Some people and animals can carry the germs that cause gastro in their intestine without having any symptoms. These people and animals can still pass the disease on to others.

### How can food and water become contaminated?

Food can become contaminated by people who have gastro, if they do not wash their hands properly after going to the toilet and before handling food. Bacteria that can cause gastro are often present in raw foods such as meats, poultry and eggs. These raw foods must always be handled, prepared and stored so as not to contaminate other foods. Proper cooking will kill these bacteria.

If insects, rodents or other animals are not stopped from entering areas where food is prepared, they may contaminate food, equipment, benches and utensils with gastro germs.

Creeks, rivers, lakes and dams may be polluted with faeces from humans or animals. You should not drink water from these sources unless it has been treated or boiled.

### **I think I may have gastroenteritis - what should I do?**

Most cases of gastroenteritis settle down on their own. However gastro can be a serious illness in some people, and may result in severe dehydration, intestinal bleeding, or generalised infection (septicaemia) if bacteria enter the bloodstream. People whose immune systems are not working properly are more likely to become seriously ill.

If you are very unwell, cannot keep fluids down or have blood in your bowel action, you should see your doctor. If you have other medical illnesses that may make you susceptible to problems from gastro (heart or kidney problems, diabetes) you should also consult your doctor for advice. This will ensure that you receive proper treatment and advice and that steps are taken to reduce the spread of the disease.

### **General measures**

You should rest and maintain a good intake of fluids, particularly water or diluted fruit juice. Special 'rehydration solution' preparations are available from the chemist, and contain fluids that are absorbed better than water alone. If you are not vomiting, you should eat simple foods, avoiding rich or spicy food. As the symptoms settle you can resume your normal activities and diet.

If you need to visit your doctor, the doctor may ask you to take a sample of your bowel actions to a pathology test provider to

check for infections. If this is required, you should contact your doctor after a few days for the results. Particular types of infection are required by law to be reported to the Health department by your doctor. If that happened you may be contacted by official from the health department investigating and "outbreak" of gastro that might all be coming from the same source (usually a commercial food outlet).

Most infectious gastro settles after a few days and does not need treatment with antibiotics, however, your doctor may prescribe antibiotics if the infection is severe or prolonged, or if your immune system is weak. Occasionally admission to hospital or extra tests are required, but this is very uncommon.

### **Can I still work?**

Food handlers, child care workers and health care workers with gastro must not work until symptoms have stopped.

Children must not attend child care centres, kindergartens or school until symptoms have stopped.

### **How can I stop spreading it to my family?**

In your household, the risk of spreading gastro can be reduced. It is very important that people

with gastro do not prepare or handle food that is to be eaten by other people and that no one shares their towel, face washer, toothbrush or eating utensils.

### **How can I avoid getting gastro?**

**By following the guidelines below, everyone can do something to avoid getting gastro.**

#### **Careful hand washing**

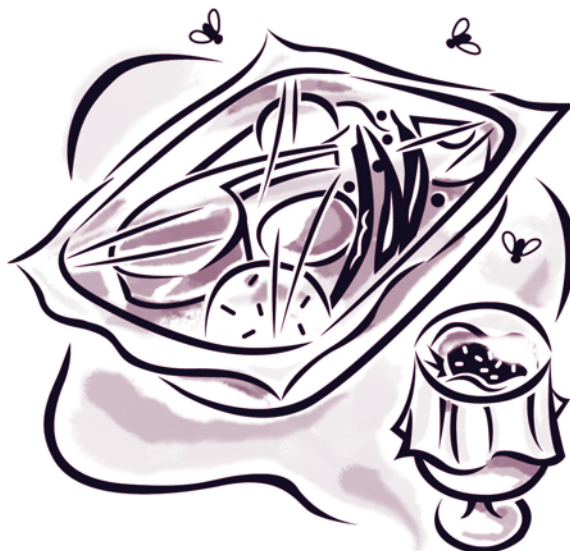
Everyone should wash their hands thoroughly with soap and hot running water for at least ten seconds:

- before preparing food
- between handling raw and ready-to-eat foods
- before eating
- after going to the toilet or changing nappies
- after smoking
- after using a tissue or handkerchief
- after working in the garden
- after playing with pets

Food handlers should use disposable paper towels or an air dryer to dry their hands. Cloth towels are not recommended as they get dirty quickly and can spread germs from one person to another.

#### **Safe food storage and handling**

- Do not handle raw and cooked foods with the same implements (tongs, knives, cutting boards), unless they have been thoroughly washed between uses. Avoid the use of wooden cutting boards and use of a specific cutting board for raw meat (in a different colour) may reduce the risk of food contamination.
- Keep all kitchen surfaces and equipment clean
- Defrost food by placing it on the lower shelves of a refrigerator or use a microwave oven
- Thoroughly cook all raw foods
- Place cooked food in a refrigerator within an hour of cooking



- Refrigerate raw foods below cooked or ready-to-eat foods to reduce cross-contamination
- Store food below 5 °C or above 60 °C to prevent growth of germs
- Thoroughly wash raw vegetables before eating
- Reheat food until the internal temperature of the food reaches at least 75 °C
- Protect food from insects, rodents and other animals

#### **Note for microwave oven users**

Part of the microwave cooking process, includes standing time.

When using a microwave, read the manufacturer's instructions carefully and observe these standing times to ensure the food is completely cooked before it is eaten.

#### **Household cleaning**

Bathrooms and toilets must be cleaned often to avoid the spread of germs. Pay particular attention to surfaces such as toilet seats and handles, taps and nappy change tables.

Sandpits can become contaminated with animal faeces and urine. Rake the sand frequently and remove any animal faeces. Cover the area when not in use.

#### **Water from untreated sources**

Untreated water that comes directly from lakes or rivers may be contaminated with faeces from people or animals. Boil water from these sources before drinking it.

#### **Child care centres**

Children are particularly susceptible to certain types of gastro. Nappy changing and children's lack of hygiene makes the transmission of these

diseases in child care settings particularly likely. It is important that thorough hand washing and cleaning procedures are carried out in these centres to control the spread of germs.

#### **Overseas travel**

Contaminated food and drink are the most common sources of gastro in travellers, particularly those travelling to developing countries. Careful selection and preparation of food and drink offer the best protection.

The main types of food and drink to avoid are uncooked food, non-bottled drinks and unpasteurised milk. Generally, cooked food that is hot, which has been thoroughly and freshly cooked and fruit and vegetables that can be peeled or shelled are safe.

Drinking water should be boiled or chemically treated if its purity is in doubt. Ice should be avoided.

**Note:** If you think the source of your illness may have been food, it is important that you report it to your local council health department as soon as possible. Retain any left over food which you believe may have caused you to become ill.

*This information booklet has been designed by the Digestive Health Foundation as an aid to people who have gastroenteritis or for those who wish to know more about it. This is not meant to replace personal advice from your medical practitioner.*

*The Digestive Health Foundation (DHF) is an educational body committed to promoting better health for all Australians by promoting education and community health programs related to the digestive system.*

*The DHF is the educational arm of the Gastroenterological Society of Australia, the professional body representing the Specialty of gastrointestinal and liver disease in Australia. Members of the Society are drawn from physicians, surgeons, scientists and other medical specialties with an interest in GI disorders.*

*Since its establishment in 1990 the DHF has been involved in the development of programs to improve community awareness and the understanding of digestive diseases.*

*Research and education into gastrointestinal disease are essential to contain the effects of these disorders on all Australians.*

*Further information on a wide variety of gastrointestinal conditions is available on our website.*



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*If you have further questions you should raise them with your own doctor.*

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