

Acute Gastroenteritis

Gastroenteritis (commonly called ‘gastro’) is an infection of the bowel that may cause diarrhoea (runny, watery bowel motions), vomiting or both.

Gastroenteritis is common in children. It is easy to catch, easy to spread and often occurs in epidemics (lots of people in an area affected at the same time of year). Gastroenteritis is very infectious so keep your child away from other children while they have vomiting or diarrhoea and wash your hands frequently.

What causes acute gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis is usually caused by a virus infection. Many different viruses may cause gastroenteritis—the most common one is called rotavirus. Other types of germs (bacteria or parasites) may also cause gastroenteritis.

Signs and symptoms

- Vomiting, usually lasting two to three days
- Diarrhoea, often very runny and smelly and usually lasting two to five days
- Fever
- Abdominal (‘tummy’) pain
- Soft bowel motions for up to two weeks
- Loss of fluid resulting in dehydration—young children (especially children under six months) are at highest risk of dehydration (when you haven’t got enough fluids in your body) and must be watched very carefully.

Signs of dehydration include:

- decreased number of wet nappies

- dry skin, mouth and tongue
- no tears when crying
- sunken eyes
- sunken fontanelle (soft spot on a baby’s head)
- cool, mottled or greyish skin
- fussiness or drowsiness

What is the treatment?

Dehydration prevention

It’s very important to replace lost body fluids and ensure your child takes enough fluid to prevent becoming dehydrated.

Mild gastroenteritis can be treated at home with frequent small amounts of cool clear fluid (less likely to be vomited back up). You may wish to try giving your child the fluid as an ice block. If your child is breastfed, continue to do so but offer feeds more frequently.

Oral rehydration (fluid replacement) solutions (e.g. Hydralyte, Glucolyte) are available from most pharmacies. They contain a balance of water, body salts and sugar and are especially designed for gastroenteritis. Follow the instructions exactly. Stronger or weaker solutions may disrupt body salt levels and harm your child.

Children with more severe dehydration may require hospitalisation so they can be given fluids intravenously (via a tube into a vein) or via a nasogastric tube (a tube down the nose). This helps to ‘top up’ the body fluids.

What if my child doesn't like the taste of the oral rehydration solution?

If this happens you need to find another fluid that your child is happy to drink. You may try:

- cordial (not low-calorie) - dilute one in six with tap or filtered water
- unsweetened fruit juice - dilute one in four with tap or filtered water
- fruit juice drinks - dilute one in four with tap or filtered water
- soft drinks like lemonade (not low-calorie) - dilute one in four with warm water to remove bubbles.

When should I return to the hospital?

Return to your doctor or hospital if your child:

- is vomiting frequently and seems unable to keep any fluid down
- has more than 8 watery motions per day
- shows any signs of dehydration (mentioned earlier)
- has stomach pain that is severe and does not stop
- brings up green vomit
- has blood in their vomit or bowel motion
- has severe neck or head pain
- shows fussiness or drowsiness
- has diarrhoea that continues for more than 10 days
- or if you are concerned about your child's condition for any other reason.

When should foods be started again?

Solid food should gradually be restarted within 24 hours. This may help shorten the duration of diarrhoea symptoms. Start with bland foods like plain pasta, boiled rice or potato, dry toast or plain biscuits. If your child is less than 12 months old, their usual milk formula should be reintroduced after 24 hours. There is no need to water down the formula.

Infection prevention at home

Gastroenteritis is highly infectious so keep your child away from other children as much as possible until the vomiting and diarrhoea have stopped.

Wash your hands well with soap and water particularly before eating or preparing meals and after changing dirty nappies.

Change your baby's nappies frequently and use a zinc-based cream on your baby's bottom to stop the diarrhoea from burning the skin.

Important facts about gastroenteritis

Young children with gastroenteritis can get dehydrated very easily.

Offer small amounts of fluid frequently and offer a drink after each vomit.

Continue offering food if they want it and don't stop food or formula for more than 24 hours.

Contact us

The Townsville Hospital and Health Service
100 Angus Smith Drive, Douglas, QLD 4814

Townsville Hospital Switchboard
T: 4433 1111 (24 hours, 7 days)

In an emergency, always call 000.

If you have any concerns and it's not an emergency, contact 13 Health (13 432 584). Qualified staff will give you advice on who to talk to and how quickly you should do it. You can phone 24 hours a day, seven days a week.



This publication has been reviewed and approved by Townsville HHS health consumers.



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