

Gastroenteritis

What is it?

Gastroenteritis is caused by an inflammation and/or irritation of the gastrointestinal tract, namely the stomach and intestines, caused by ingesting tainted water or food-borne bacteria, parasites and viruses. It can also be caused by certain prescription and over-the-counter medications, or by ingesting something with dairy, if the patient is lactose intolerant.

Symptoms

Symptoms of gastroenteritis vary from patient to patient, but can include a combination of the following, in varying degrees of severity:

- ✓ Fever
- ✓ Nausea and/or vomiting
- ✓ Diarrhea
- ✓ Bloating and pain
- ✓ Cramping
- ✓ Tenderness and/or swelling in the abdomen
- ✓ Dehydration

Diagnosis

Because some of these symptoms may lead to dehydration, especially in infants and the elderly, it is important to seek professional medical attention if the vomiting or diarrhea lasts more than 48 hours, if there is blood in the stool, or if you suspect the person is becoming dehydrated. In addition to listening carefully to your symptoms, and asking questions about medications, dietary changes, and recent travel, your physician will likely perform imaging and/or lab tests to make a diagnosis.

These tests may include a combination of the following:

- ✓ Stool analysis, to check for parasites or blood
- ✓ Physical examination of your abdomen

To gain an accurate diagnosis, it is important that you clearly and carefully describe your symptoms to your physician.

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Treatments

Depending on the cause of the gastroenteritis, and the severity of it, treatment plans will vary from patient to patient. Because there is such a danger of dehydration, your physician will recommend drinking non-caffeinated, non-dairy liquids, in particular those containing electrolytes.



A treatment plan may include any combination of the following:

- ✓ Rehydration drinks
- ✓ Prescription antibiotics, depending on the type of bacteria detected, if any
- ✓ An over-the-counter emetic, depending on the type of bacteria detected, if any
- ✓ Gradual return to a solid-foods diet, beginning first with the BRAT diet (banana, rice, applesauce, toast)
- ✓ If the gastroenteritis is caused by a food sensitivity or intolerance, or a medication, your physician may recommend a dietary supplement or change, or a different medication

Helpful Hints

- ✓ Because many cases of gastroenteritis are caused by contact with infectious germs, to avoid infection, wash your hands before and after handling food, and always after using the bathroom or handling a diaper.
- ✓ If at any time your symptoms worsen, please consult your physician again.