

## Gastroenteritis (gastro) – what is it and how did I get it?

Gastro is an illness which may cause some or all of the following symptoms:

- diarrhoea
- stomach cramps
- vomiting
- nausea
- fever
- headache.

Germs which cause gastro get into your body through your mouth and it usually takes several days for symptoms to appear. This time is known as the incubation period. 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, but this is usually not the case.

## What causes gastro and how is it spread?

The most common germs that cause gastroenteritis are bacteria, viruses and certain parasites. They may be found in soil, wild and pet animals including birds, and humans.

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 faeces of an infected person, or indirectly by touching contaminated surfaces such as taps, toilet flush handles, children's toys and nappies
- eating contaminated food
- drinking contaminated water
- airborne through droplets of vomit, coughing or sneezing (mainly viruses).
- handling pets and other animals.

People and animals can carry the germs which cause gastro in their faeces 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 which can cause gastro are often present on 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 gastroenteritis germs.

Creeks, rivers, lakes and dams may be polluted with faeces from humans or animals.

## I think I may have gastroenteritis – what should I do?

If you have symptoms of gastroenteritis, report them to your doctor. This will ensure that you receive proper treatment and advice and that steps are taken to reduce the spread of the disease.

If you think that a particular food caused your illness tell your doctor and report it to your local council health department as soon as possible. Keep any left over food in the refrigerator in case the council decides to collect it for laboratory testing.

## Can I still work?

Food handlers, childcare workers and healthcare workers with gastro should not work until diarrhoea has stopped. After they return to work they should take extra care with hand washing.

Children must not attend child care centres, kindergartens or school until there has not been a loose bowel motion for 48 hours.

## 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 working in the garden
- after playing with and feeding pets
- after contact with farm animals.

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

- Keep all kitchen surfaces and equipment clean.
- Avoid cross-contamination by keeping raw foods and ready-to-eat foods separate and using separate, clean utensils, containers and equipment.
- Keep high-risk foods (meat, poultry, dairy products, eggs, smallgoods, seafood, cooked rice or pasta, prepared fruit and salads) out of the temperature danger zone. Keep chilled food cold at 5 °C or colder and hot food hot at 60 °C or hotter.
- In the refrigerator, store raw foods below cooked or ready-to-eat foods to prevent cross contamination.
- Cook and reheat foods thoroughly; make sure foods such as meats and poultry are cooked or reheated until their core temperature reaches 75 °C.
- Place cooked foods in the refrigerator within two hours of cooking.
- Defrost food in the refrigerator or use a microwave oven and cook immediately.
- Avoid spoiled foods, foods past their use-by-date, or food in damaged containers or packaging.
- Thoroughly wash raw fruit and vegetables before eating.
- Protect food from insects, rodents and other animals.
- When in doubt, throw it out.

### Microwave cooking

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 proper hygiene makes the transmission of these diseases in child care settings particularly high. 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.

## Further information

Department of Health

Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit

Phone: 1300 651 160

[www.health.vic.gov.au/ideas](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/ideas)

© Copyright Department of Health 2011. Authorised by the State Government of Victoria, 50 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne. September 2011. (1006016) PH082