

Viral Gastroenteritis

What parents need to know

What is viral gastroenteritis?

Viral gastroenteritis is an infection that destroys cells lining the small intestine. This infection may cause vomiting, diarrhea, and possible dehydration in children. There are several viruses, including rotaviruses and norovirus, that cause this illness, many of which are highly contagious.

Symptoms of viral gastroenteritis

Symptoms of these viruses include watery diarrhea, vomiting, fever, headache, abdominal cramps, and muscle aches. These symptoms usually clear in 1-2 days but may last for up to 2 weeks. Children are at higher risk for dehydration, particularly if they have severe diarrhea accompanied by vomiting, and should be monitored closely.

Symptoms of dehydration include slight dry mouth, increased thirst, less urine production, fewer tears, and sunken eyes. Children may become irritable or their heart rate may increase in severe situations. If you suspect your child is dehydrated, contact your clinician.

How viral gastroenteritis is spread

Viral gastroenteritis is highly contagious. These viruses, particularly norovirus, are found in the feces and vomit of infected persons. Children may become infected after touching contaminated surfaces and then placing their hands in their mouths, eating or drinking contaminated foods and beverages, or by sharing eating utensils. Parents may become infected while caring for children, particularly those in diapers.

Prevention of viral gastroenteritis

Have your child wash his/her hands frequently with soap and water. Parents and siblings should wash their hands before preparing food, eating, after diaper changes, and after cleaning contaminated surfaces. Ill parents should not prepare food for other family members. Laundry that has been soiled should be removed and washed immediately. Contaminated surfaces should be cleaned with a product containing bleach.

Treatment

There is no specific treatment for viral gastroenteritis. Encourage your child to drink plenty of fluids, rest, and continue eating. Monitor your child closely for signs of dehydration and keep them out of school until they have been symptom-free for one day.

Prevention Tips

Wash your hands with soap and water

Hand hygiene is essential for preventing the spread of infection. Soap and water should be used if hands are visibly soiled, after using the restroom, changing a diaper, or handling soiled items.

Keep sick children at home

If your child is sick, they should not attend school until they have been symptom-free for 1 day.

Clean soiled areas carefully

Items that have come into contact with a sick child, vomit, or feces, should be carefully cleaned using a product containing bleach. Hands should be cleaned after disinfecting any items.

