

Self Care Information

Viral gastroenteritis, is caused by a number of nasty viruses, such as noroviruses, rotaviruses, and adenoviruses.

These viruses target the digestive tract and cause inflammation of the stomach and intestines. The most awful symptoms, diarrhea, vomiting, and cramps are actually your body's defense mechanisms. Your body is trying to drive the virus out.

Symptoms usually last 1-3 days. The greatest risk is from dehydration. Untreated dehydration can be dangerous.

Call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department if you have experienced:

- Severe abdominal pain
- Blood in your stool or vomit
- Signs of dehydration
 - Have not urinated in the past 6-8 hours (while awake)
 - Not had anything to drink in the past several hours, or can't keep any fluids down
 - Dizziness or confusion

Call a medical provider if you have:

- Diarrhea that lasts more than a few days.
- Vomiting for more than 24 hours.

There is no cure for viral gastroenteritis. Antibiotics don't help, because it's caused by viruses, not bacteria. For the most part, you just have to wait it out. In the meantime, there are some things you can do to make yourself more comfortable and prevent complications.

- **Drink more.** It's important to increase fluid intake when you are vomiting or have diarrhea. Adults should aim to get one cup of fluid every hour. Drink slowly, since too much at once could worsen vomiting. If you have difficulty tolerating fluids, drink 1 teaspoon of clear liquids every few minutes to every 15 minutes.
- **Drink wisely.** Adults can use oral rehydration solutions or diluted sports drinks, clear broth, or decaffeinated tea. Sugary, carbonated, caffeinated, drinks with artificial sweeteners or alcoholic drinks can make diarrhea worse.
- **Don't eat *only* bland foods.** Drink clear liquids for 12-24 hours and then progress to foods. The old advice was to stick with a liquid diet for a few days and then to add in bland foods, such as the BRAT diet of bananas, rice, applesauce, and toast. That's fine for the first day or so. However, you should return to your normal diet as soon as you feel up to it. BRAT foods aren't bad. They just don't provide the fat and protein that you need. Sticking with them too long could actually slow your recovery.
- **Get the right nutrients.** Look for foods with potassium (such as potatoes, bananas, and fruit juices), salt (such as pretzels and soup), and yogurt with active bacterial cultures.

Even a little fat could help, because it slows down digestion and may reduce diarrhea. If you feel up to it, add a pat of butter or some lean meat to your next meal.

- **Rest.** Give your body time to recover. You should not return to work or school for 3 days after symptoms have resolved. This is very important to reduce the risk of spreading the infection to others.
- **Wash your hands.** Viral gastroenteritis is not killed by hand sanitizer. You must wash your hands with soap and water. Always wash your hands for at least 15 seconds after using the bathroom, before eating, and after changing a diaper. Clean your house with a bleach solution to prevent your family members or roommates from becoming ill.

Adapted from webmd.com