UK Health Security Agency

Stomach Bug (Gastroenteritis) Factsheet

What is a stomach bug?

A stomach bug (also called gastroenteritis) is an infection of the stomach and bowels caused by germs such as viruses, bacteria and, less commonly, parasites. It can cause diarrhoea (runny poo), vomiting (being sick), and feeling unwell.

Norovirus is the most common cause of stomach bugs in England and Wales and is sometimes called the winter vomiting bug. It spreads very easily, especially in places where people mix closely together, such as schools, nurseries and workplaces.

How stomach bugs spread

The most common way to get a stomach bug is from eating or drinking contaminated food or water. You can also catch it by:

- being in close contact with someone who has it
- touching a surface that an infected person has touched.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms can include:

- vomiting (being sick)
- diarrhoea (runny poo)
- feeling sick, like you may vomit
- a fever (high temperature)
- headaches
- aches and pains

Most people start to feel better within a few days.

How to stop a stomach bug spreading

There are simple things you can do to protect yourself and others.

Stay at home to protect others

If you have diarrhoea or have been sick, stay away from school, nursery or work until it has been 48 hours (2 full days) since you last had diarrhoea or were sick.

Even when you start to feel better, you can still spread the virus or bacteria to other people.

Wash your hands well

Handwashing is one of the best ways to stop stomach bugs spreading. Wash your hands with soap and water:

- after using the toilet
- before eating or preparing food

- after helping someone who is unwell
- when arriving at or leaving school, nursery or work

Wash your hands with soap and water regularly. Alcohol hand gels may not be effective against some stomach bugs, including norovirus.

Clean surfaces and laundry

- Wash dirty clothing, bedding and towels with detergent at 60°C
- Clean surfaces carefully using a household disinfectant. Where product instructions allow, use a bleach-based disinfectant
- Pay extra attention to frequently touched areas such as taps, toilet flushes and door handles

Treatment

Most people recover fully within 2 to 3 days and do not need medicine or medical treatment.

To help yourself recover:

- drink plenty of fluids
- rest as much as possible
- eat when you feel able to

When to get medical advice

Call NHS 111 if:

- symptoms are severe
- you cannot keep fluids down
- you are worried about yourself or your child

Where possible, avoid visiting your GP surgery or A&E with diarrhoea and vomiting unless you have been advised to do so. This helps prevent the virus spreading to other people.

Further Information:

Diarrhoea and vomiting - NHS (www.nhs.uk)

How to stop norovirus spreading - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)