



Viral Gastroenteritis Fact Sheet

What is viral gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis is an inflammation of the stomach and small and large intestines. Viral gastroenteritis is an infection caused by a variety of viruses that result in vomiting and diarrhea. Several hundred people develop this infection in Oklahoma and worldwide each year.

Who gets viral gastroenteritis?

Anyone can get viral gastroenteritis. It occurs in people of all ages and backgrounds. However, some viruses tend to cause diarrheal disease among people in specific age groups. Rotavirus infection is the most common cause of diarrhea in infants and young children under 5 years of age. Adenoviruses and astroviruses cause diarrhea mostly in young children, but older children and adults can also be affected. Norwalk and Noroviruses are more likely to cause diarrhea in older children and adults.

How are these viruses spread?

The viruses that cause gastroenteritis are spread by eating or drinking infected food or water. They are also spread by close contact with infected persons, such as through sharing food, water, or eating utensils.

What are the symptoms of viral gastroenteritis infection?

People infected with viral gastroenteritis may have mild to severe watery diarrhea and vomiting. Sometimes fever, headache, and abdominal cramps may occur.

How soon after infection with the viruses that cause gastroenteritis do symptoms appear?

Diarrhea and vomiting usually occur 1 to 2 days after infection with a virus that causes gastroenteritis and may last for 1 to 10 days, depending on which virus causes the illness.

How does food become contaminated by gastroenteritis viruses?

Food preparers or handlers who have viral gastroenteritis may contaminate food, especially if they do not wash their hands regularly after using the restroom. Shellfish and drinking water can also be contaminated by sewage.

Do infected people need to be excluded from work or school?

Since the viruses that cause gastroenteritis are found in the feces (stool), people with diarrhea (especially children in day care centers or people who handle food) should not go to school or work. Most infected people may return when their diarrhea stops if they carefully wash their hands after using the toilet and before handling food.

What is the treatment for viral gastroenteritis?

Most people will recover on their own. The most important treatment of viral gastroenteritis is to prevent severe loss of fluids (dehydration). Persons with severe diarrhea, especially small children and elderly people, should see a doctor.

How can viral gastroenteritis be prevented?

1. Wash hands frequently and always wash hands after using the restroom or changing dirty diapers.
2. Wash hands carefully before and after preparing food.
3. Disinfect contaminated surfaces with household chlorine bleach-based cleaners and wash soiled articles of clothing promptly.