

# Stomach Flu

## What is stomach flu?

Stomach flu is a viral infection that affects the stomach and small bowel. The illness is usually brief, lasting just 1 to 3 days. However, it may be 1 to 2 weeks before your bowel habits are back to normal.

## What is the cause?

Many different kinds of viruses can cause stomach flu. You can get a virus from contact with other people who are infected. For example, you might get it by kissing or shaking hands or by sharing food, drink, or eating utensils.

## What are the symptoms?

When you have stomach flu, you may have 1 or more of the following symptoms:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Stomach cramps
- Diarrhea
- Mild fever and chills
- Feeling very tired
- Loss of appetite
- Headache
- Muscle aches

You may suddenly have stomach cramps, vomiting, or diarrhea, or your symptoms may start more slowly.

Some bacteria, parasites, medicines, or other medical problems can cause symptoms that are like stomach flu. If your symptoms are severe or last longer than a couple days, your healthcare provider can check to see if they are caused by something other than a virus.

## How is it treated?

Most of the time you don't need to see your healthcare provider for treatment. Here are some things you can do to feel better:

- Rest your stomach and bowel but make sure that you keep getting fluids. You can do this by not eating anything and by drinking clear liquids only. If you have been vomiting a lot, it's best to have just small, frequent sips. Drinking too much at once may cause more vomiting. Clear liquids include:
  - Water
  - Weak tea
  - Fruit juice mixed half and half with water

- Light-colored soft drinks without caffeine (like 7-UP) after stirring until the bubbles are gone (the bubbles can make vomiting worse)
- Sport drinks or other rehydration drinks
- Avoid liquids that are acidic, like orange juice, or caffeinated, like coffee. If you have diarrhea, don't drink milk.
- It may be easier to keep down liquids that are cold. Suck on ice chips or Popsicles if you feel too sick to sip fluids. Build up to drinking larger amounts of clear fluids. If you vomit, wait an hour and then start over with small sips.
- You may start eating soft, plain foods when you have not vomited for several hours and are able to drink clear liquids without further upset. Good choices are:
  - Jell-O
  - Soda crackers
  - Toast
  - Plain noodles
  - Rice
  - Cooked cereal
  - Baked or mashed potatoes
  - Soft-boiled eggs
  - Applesauce
  - Bananas
- Eat small amounts slowly and avoid foods that are hard to digest or may irritate your stomach, such as foods with acid (like tomatoes or oranges), spicy or fatty food, meats, and raw vegetables. You may be able to go back to your normal diet in 3 days or so.
- If you have cramps or stomach pain, it may help to put a hot water bottle or heating pad on your stomach. Cover the hot water bottle with a towel or set the heating pad on low so you don't burn your skin.
- Rest as much as possible. Sit or lie down with your head propped up. Don't lie flat for at least 2 hours after eating.
- Don't take aspirin, ibuprofen, or other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) without checking first with your healthcare provider. NSAIDs, such as ibuprofen, naproxen, and aspirin, may cause stomach bleeding and other problems. These risks increase with age. Read the label and take as directed. Unless recommended by your healthcare provider, do not take for more than 10 days for any reason.
- You can buy nonprescription medicine to treat diarrhea at the drugstore. If you use it, make sure you use only the dose recommended on the package. Don't use the medicine for more than 2 days without checking with your healthcare provider. If you have chronic health problems, always check with your provider before you use any medicine for diarrhea.
- Call your healthcare provider if:
  - Your symptoms are getting worse.

- You keep having severe symptoms (vomiting or diarrhea every 1 to 2 hours) for more than 24 hours, or you are not getting better after a few days.
- You start having symptoms that are not usually caused by stomach flu, such as blood in your vomit, bloody diarrhea, or severe stomach pain.

Your healthcare provider may recommend prescription medicine to prevent nausea and vomiting or to treat diarrhea.

If you have severe vomiting or diarrhea, your body can lose too much fluid and you can get dehydrated. Dehydration can be very dangerous, especially for children and older adults. You may also be losing minerals that your body needs to keep working normally. Your healthcare provider may recommend an oral rehydration solution, which is a drink that replaces fluids and minerals. If you are very dehydrated, you may need to be given IV fluids at the hospital.

## **How can I help prevent stomach flu?**

The best thing you can do to help prevent the spread of stomach flu is to wash your hands often. Be especially sure to always wash your hands before you eat. Also, avoid contact with the body fluids of others who may be sick, including saliva. Don't share food with someone who has stomach flu.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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