

Viral Gastroenteritis

Gastroenteritis is an inflammatory condition of the stomach and intestines. Infection with a virus (an infectious particle spread by close contact of persons, contaminated food or water, and infected surfaces or material) is the most common cause of acute gastroenteritis in developed countries. **Viral gastroenteritis** is caused by many types of viruses, including norovirus (previously called Norwalk-like virus), rotavirus, and adenovirus.

SYMPTOMS

- Diarrhea
- Nausea and vomiting
- Abdominal pain and bloating
- Fever, malaise, and muscle aches may be present but are not always. Symptoms typically resolve on their own in 2 to 3 days.

DIAGNOSIS

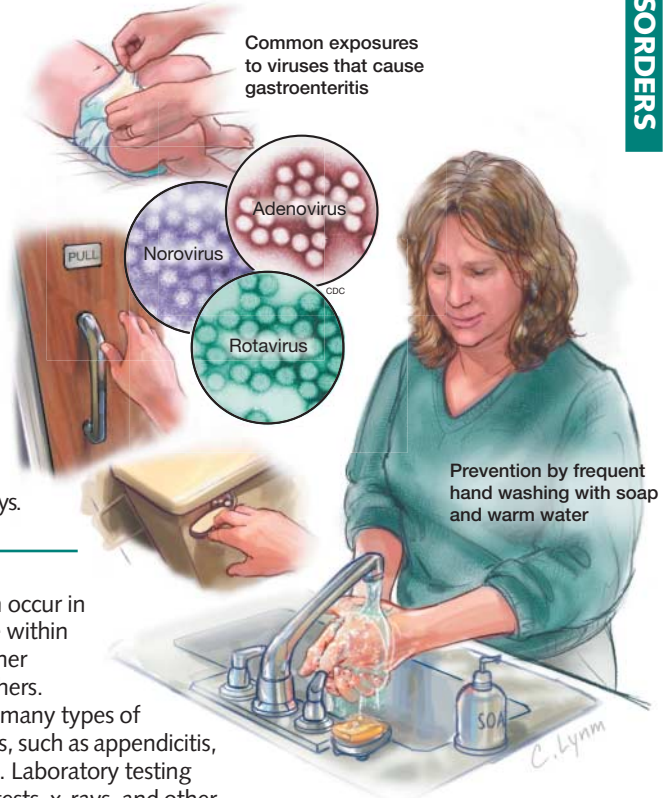
Viral gastroenteritis is caused by person-to-person spread and can occur in an outbreak or **epidemic** (a sudden increase in a particular disease within an area or population). A medical history looks for exposure to other persons with gastroenteritis, travel, or eating food prepared by others. Because diarrhea, nausea, and abdominal pain may be caused by many types of illnesses, it is important to consider other causes of these symptoms, such as appendicitis, bowel obstruction, hepatitis, and other gastrointestinal conditions. Laboratory testing to identify the specific virus is not usually done, but blood or stool tests, x-rays, and other testing may be done if the symptoms last longer than a few days or if a more serious problem is suspected.

TREATMENT

Most cases of viral gastroenteritis last only a few days, and therefore affected persons do not commonly seek medical attention. Antibiotics or other specific medications are not used to treat viral gastroenteritis. **Dehydration** (loss of water required for normal body function) is the most common complication, so affected persons should drink plenty of fluids, including **oral** (through the mouth) **rehydration solutions**. For severe cases of dehydration, hospital care and **intravenous** (through a vein) fluids may be needed. Infants, young children, older persons, and people with unhealthy immune systems (due to cancer, poor nutrition, human immunodeficiency virus infection, or other chronic illnesses) may have more severe cases of viral gastroenteritis.

PREVENTION

- The most important way to prevent viral gastroenteritis is to wash your hands frequently with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds at a time. Wash your hands before eating, after using the toilet, after changing diapers, or after being in public places (because of touching surfaces like door handles, elevator buttons, stair rails, and shopping carts).
- There is a higher risk of a viral gastroenteritis outbreak in places where large groups of people are in close contact. These include nursing homes, day care centers, banquets, cruise ships, college campuses, and military bases.
- A vaccine for rotavirus is recommended for infants.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases www.niddk.nih.gov
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov
- World Health Organization www.who.int

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Sources: National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, World Health Organization, American College of Gastroenterology

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