

# Gastroenteritis

Information for patients  
and visitors



This leaflet answers common questions about gastroenteritis. If you would like further information, or have any particular worries, please do not hesitate to ask a member of the infection prevention and control team, your nurse or doctor.

## What is gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis is a common condition where the stomach and intestines become inflamed. It is usually caused by a viral or bacterial infection.

The infection is much more common in the winter months, but can also occur throughout the year. It is highly infectious and spreads easily among people.

It is **not** a hospital infection as such; the infection affects a lot of people in the community and outbreaks have been known to occur in workplaces, schools, hotels, cruise ships and in other situations where people congregate in a confined space. Up to 1 million people in the UK are thought to be affected by it every year.

When the infection is brought into a hospital environment, it can easily spread to staff and vulnerable hospital patients.

Past outbreaks of the infection in hospitals have resulted in a high number of patients and staff being affected, and wards being closed in order to prevent spread. This has a huge detrimental effect on care

provision. We therefore have very strict policies in place to control its spread.

### **What are the symptoms of gastroenteritis?**

Depending on the specific cause, the symptoms of gastroenteritis can take anything between a few hours and a few days to develop after you are infected. Symptoms usually start with the sudden onset of severe vomiting. This can be so forceful that it is termed 'projectile vomiting'. Other symptoms include repeated diarrhoea and stomach cramps.

Symptoms usually last for 24-48 hours, but most people feel 'washed out' for a few days after symptoms have settled. There are no long term effects and, even in the frail and the elderly, most people make a full recovery.

People remain highly infectious for at least 48 hours after symptoms have settled. This makes transmission very difficult to control.

Unfortunately, immunity is short-lived. This means that even if a person has had gastroenteritis in the past, they may still get re-infected.

### **Is there any treatment?**

There is no specific treatment for the infection itself. You should drink plenty of clear fluids to avoid dehydration. In some instances, you may be given fluids via a 'drip'.

## How can you catch gastroenteritis?

Gastroenteritis can spread very easily from one person to another and only a very small amount of the organism is needed to cause infection. It may be caught:

- If you are exposed to the vomit or diarrhoea of an infected person eg when cleaning up
- If you do not wash your hands after using the toilet
- If you touch surfaces (such as toilet seats, bed rails, furniture) that have been contaminated
- From food that has been contaminated
- By breathing in air that is contaminated for some time after projectile vomiting

## How is gastroenteritis prevented in hospital?

As gastroenteritis spreads so easily, and can be spread via people who are asymptomatic (present no symptoms of the infection), it is impossible to prevent all infection in hospital. Instead, we concentrate on measures that will reduce the chance of it spreading.

1. **Good hand washing** with soap and water is the key to preventing the infection from spreading. Alcohol hand gel does not kill organisms causing gastroenteritis.

- Staff should clean their hands before and after touching each patient but it is particularly important that they wash their hands with soap and water after tending to an infected patient to

prevent it spreading to other patients via their hands.

- Visitors should wash their hands with soap and water after visiting a ward which has infectious patients and they should not interact with other patients other than the person they have come to visit.
- Staff and visitors should wash their hands before handling food and after visiting the toilet.

2. **Isolating patients.** Patients with symptoms of gastroenteritis will be isolated from non-infected patients. The infected patient will normally be placed in a single room, but if there are a few cases of infection on the ward, infected patients will be nursed in a dedicated bay. If there are a large number of cases, the ward may be closed to new admissions. Visiting may also be restricted to prevent visitors getting the infection.
3. **Cleaning.** A chlorine based disinfectant is used to eradicate the infection from the environment. Vomit and diarrhoea must be cleaned up immediately and general ward cleaning will be increased.
4. **Symptomatic people must stay away from hospital.** Staff and visitors who develop symptoms must not come into the hospital and they must remain away from the hospital until they have been free of symptoms for 48-72 hours.

Staff must be cleared by occupational health before returning to work.

**If you have any further questions please contact our infection prevention and control team on:**

Barnet Hospital: 020 8216 4454

Chase Farm Hospital: 020 8216 4454

Royal Free Hospital: 020 7472 6607

## For more information please visit:

- NHS Choices  
[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)  
[www.nhs.uk/conditions/gastroenteritis](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/gastroenteritis)  
[www.nhs.uk/conditions/Norovirus](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Norovirus)
- Public Health England  
[www.gov.uk/topic/health-protection](http://www.gov.uk/topic/health-protection)
- University of Portsmouth  
<http://www.port.ac.uk/departments/services/humanresources/occupationalhealthservice/downloads/fileto download,170396,en.pdf>

**This leaflet is available in other languages, large print, Braille and audio format upon request; please ask a member of staff.**

© Infection prevention and control department

Version number: 2

Approval date: December 2015

Review date: December 2017

[www.royalfree.nhs.uk](http://www.royalfree.nhs.uk)