

Viral Gastroenteritis Fact Sheet

What is Viral Gastroenteritis?

Viral gastroenteritis is a term which covers a variety of viral infections that cause diarrhoea and other gastric upsets, particularly in infants and young children. The commonest is called rotavirus and there is a separate information sheet covering this. Other common viruses causing viral gastroenteritis are Small Round Structured Virus (SRSV); Adenovirus; Calicivirus and Astrovirus. Small Round Structured Virus mainly affects adults and the elderly while the others affect mainly infants and schoolchildren.

How is Viral Gastroenteritis caught?

Infections are caught either from food (SRSV mainly), from another person or from a surface contaminated with virus, which can survive outside the body for some time. These viruses are rarely caught from an animal.

It is very easy indeed to catch as the diarrhoea of an infected person contains millions of virus particles, while the number needed to transmit infection is only 10-100. The time from infection to the development of the first symptom is usually 1 or 2 days, occasionally up to 4 days.

Viral gastroenteritis remains infectious during the stage of active diarrhoea and for some days afterwards. People with impaired immune systems may excrete virus for some weeks.

What are the symptoms of Viral Gastroenteritis ?

Typically the symptoms of viral gastroenteritis are diarrhoea, vomiting and a flu-like picture of fever, headache and muscle pains. Calicivirus is unusual in that its main, and sometimes only, symptom is vomiting. Most illnesses generally last 1 to 4 days, though some can run on for a fortnight or so. Severe cases of viral gastroenteritis, as with all other causes of diarrhoea, can lead to dehydration and need admission to hospital.

How do I know if I have Viral Gastroenteritis ?

Many different kinds of disease can cause diarrhoea and so, to make a definite diagnosis, a stool sample must be examined in the laboratory. Most cases are so mild that the complex laboratory testing needed to identify the virus is rarely required.

How is Viral Gastroenteritis treated?

Viral gastroenteritis, as with all viral infections, cannot be treated with antibiotics. It is most important that an affected person gets sufficient fluid intake while they have diarrhoea. Food intake over this time is much less important.

What can be done to prevent Viral Gastroenteritis ?

As viral gastroenteritis is so easily caught from another person, strict hygiene in the household is important, particularly when changing nappies and clothes. Some viruses can be caught by inhaling tiny vomit particles so particular care is needed in dealing with a sick person. A 'hot wash' destroys any virus on clothing. The virus is often transmitted from one infected child to another by contaminated hands or objects. Washing contaminated surfaces such as toilet handles and taps with soaps or cleansers will not kill the virus but will help prevent its spread.