

## *Greenwich Hospital*

### What is Gastroenteritis?

#### PATIENT/FAMILY INFORMATION SHEET

#### What is Gastroenteritis and what are the symptoms?

Gastroenteritis is an inflammation and infection of the stomach and small and large intestines caused by organisms such as viruses, bacteria, and parasites.

The common symptoms may include:

- Fever
- Nausea
- Abdominal cramping
- Loss of appetite
- Vomiting
- Weight loss
- Watery diarrhea
- Dehydration

#### What organisms cause gastroenteritis?

- *Viral* gastroenteritis is caused by a variety of viruses and it is highly contagious. Anyone can become infected with viral gastroenteritis and most people recover without any complications. It can be serious for people who do not drink enough fluids to replace what is lost, such as infants, young children, and the elderly. It can also be serious for those people with a weakened immune system.

Viral gastroenteritis is spread through close contact with infected persons through such avenues as sharing food, water, and eating utensils. Infection may also occur by eating or drinking contaminated foods and beverages.

- Gastroenteritis caused by *Shigella* bacteria is highly contagious and also spreads easily from person to person through direct contact. These bacteria may also cause ulcers of the intestinal wall and bleeding.
- Gastroenteritis caused by *Salmonella* bacteria is a major cause of food poisoning. *Salmonella* is frequently found in raw chicken and eggs.
- Gastroenteritis caused by *E. coli* bacteria is spread through direct person-to-person contact (such as hand-shaking) or contaminated water or food, such as undercooked beef in hamburgers or unwashed fruit. The *E. coli* bacteria are found in human and animal waste. Some strains produce a toxin that can be life threatening to small children and frail elderly.
- Gastroenteritis caused by the *Giardia* parasite spreads easily through contaminated water and person-to-person contact. This parasite can spread through contaminated water in water parks, pools, streams, and lakes. It is resistant to chlorine treatments.

**\*\*Prevention through good hand-washing is important to prevent the spread of gastroenteritis. It is also important to thoroughly wash raw fruits and vegetables, and thoroughly cook meats and eggs.**

## How is gastroenteritis treated?

- Most cases of viral gastroenteritis resolve on their own without specific treatments. Antibiotics are not effective in treating viral infections. The primary goal of treatment is to reduce the symptoms and replace fluids.
- Do not take any anti-diarrheal medication unless advised to do so by your doctor. This type of medication is contraindicated in some forms of gastroenteritis.
- *Shigella* is often treated with antibiotics to shorten the duration of the illness and to prevent the spread of *Shigella* bacteria to other people.

Hospitalization might be needed for children or elderly who become moderately or severely dehydrated or for those with other health problems.

- *Salmonella* infections usually resolve on their own in 5-7 days. Persons with severe diarrhea may require extra fluids, often with intravenous therapy. Antibiotics are not usually necessary unless the infection spreads from the intestines.
- *E. coli* infections also usually resolve on their own. It is important to drink liquids to replace those fluids that have been lost through diarrhea. A combination of mild, clear liquids, such as water, clear broth, and sports drinks are best. Avoid milk and milk products, and restart them slowly when diarrhea subsides. Your doctor may also order intravenous therapy to increase your fluid intake. It is not recommended to take anti-diarrheal medicines to stop the diarrhea unless your doctor tells you to. These medicines keep your intestines from getting rid of the *E. coli* organism.
- *Giardia* infections are usually treated with medications, such as metronidazole (Flagyl) or furazolidone (Furoxone). Your doctor may also want to treat other individuals living in your household because this parasite is so easily spread. Your doctor may also ask you to bring a stool sample to the lab after the medication is finished to be sure that the parasite is gone.

## What is dehydration?

Dehydration is the loss of fluids from the body. Diarrhea from gastroenteritis may cause dehydration. The symptoms of dehydration are:

- Excessive thirst
- Dry mouth
- Little or no urine production, or dark yellow colored urine
- Fever
- Severe weakness or lethargy
- Dizziness or lightheadedness

Tell your doctor or nurse if you notice any of these symptoms. Mild dehydration can be treated by drinking extra fluids. Moderate to severe dehydration may require intravenous therapy to replace lost fluids. Untreated severe dehydration can be life threatening.

Source: Centers for Disease Control @ [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) Retrieved April 13, 2005; Nemours Foundation @ <http://kidshealth.org> Retrieved April 13, 2005

*For more Patient Fact Sheets, see the Greenwich Hospital web site at [www.greenhosp.org](http://www.greenhosp.org) and Click on Patients & Visitors, then Patient Education*