

Hospital Authority Health Guide

Gastroenteritis

(1) Causes and Symptoms of Gastroenteritis

- Causes of acute gastroenteritis varied. One common cause is consuming food contaminated with virus or bacteria. Food poisoning is mainly caused by consuming food containing bacterial toxins, mostly due to improper handling of food or prolonged storage at room temperature leading to bacterial growth. Allergic gastroenteritis is caused by having eaten foods such as egg, shrimp and crab, and milk that will easily trigger allergic reactions in certain people. Food poisoning caused by consuming food contaminated with chemicals, e.g. vegetables with excessive pesticide, is relatively uncommon.
- Viruses or bacteria adhered to the gastrointestinal mucosa will cause vomiting or diarrhea which are common symptoms of gastroenteritis and may last for a few days. Other possible symptoms include decreased appetite, nausea, abdominal bloating, stomachache or fever, etc.

(2) Health Impact of Gastroenteritis

- Dehydration is a complication of serious vomiting or diarrhea. As young children's bodies contain less water than those of adults, they are more vulnerable to dehydration and may result in serious consequences;
- Vomiting and diarrhea will cause electrolyte imbalance which affects proper functioning of the body;
- Gastrointestinal mucosal damage will make the stomach intolerable to dairy products or fatty food which may worsen diarrhea.

(3) Home Care Tips for Gastroenteritis

- Take medications as prescribed, including an oral rehydration solution which serves as an electrolyte supplement. Patients should drink more water, glucose water or rice water;
- Observe food restrictions;
- Can start to have light meals or fluid intake as vomiting decreased.

(4) Signs for Alert

Seek medical attention promptly if any of the following symptoms appear:

(A) Signs of dehydration, e.g.

- diarrhea intensifies or stool frequency increases;

- mouth and tongue become extremely dry;
- diminished or loss of skin turgor;
- urine output substantially reduces;
- sunken eyes or dark circles;
- sunken fontanelle in babies;
- breathing getting fast or too slow;
- dullness or disorientation.

(B) Serious vomiting that affects eating and drinking

(C) Diarrhea intensifies, mucus or blood in the stool, which suggests possibility of other complications.

(5) Prevention Advice for Gastroenteritis

- Practise good hygiene with frequent hand-washing especially before cooking, eating and after toileting;
- Avoid eating undercooked seafood and shellfish to reduce the chance of food poisoning;
- Wash vegetables and meat thoroughly before cooking;
- Put fresh food in the fridge or freezer if not consumed immediately. Raw food and cooked food should be stored separately;
- If babies are fed with feeding bottles, strictly observe the sterilizing procedures. Discard unfinished milk immediately and do not use for the next feeding;
- Avoid thumb sucking in children.

Caution : Most antidiarrheal drugs can only treat the symptoms but not the root cause. These drugs may slow down peristalsis, allowing bacteria to stay in the intestines leading to continued bacterial growth and prolonged risk. If it is not necessary, do not use antidiarrheal drugs, especially for children with gastroenteritis. This may lead to serious side effects in children, e.g. paralytic gut, tiredness or failure to breath. For simple gastroenteritis, use of antibiotics is not necessary.

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