

Understanding and Managing Gastroenteritis (Stomach Flu) in Nova Scotia

Gastroenteritis, commonly referred to as the **stomach flu**, is an inflammation of the stomach and intestines, typically caused by **viruses, bacteria, or parasites**. Although it is often mistaken for influenza due to similar symptoms like fever and fatigue, it affects the **gastrointestinal system**, not the respiratory system.

In Nova Scotia, gastroenteritis is relatively common, especially during **late fall to early spring**, and is frequently caused by **norovirus**, a highly contagious virus that can spread rapidly in communities like **Halifax, Dartmouth**, and surrounding areas. With proper precautions, diet awareness, and timely medical intervention, the impact of this illness can be minimized.

1. How to Prevent Gastroenteritis (Stomach Flu)

Preventing gastroenteritis primarily involves **good hygiene, safe food practices**, and **community health awareness**.

A. Hygiene Practices

- **Handwashing:** Wash hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds, especially after using the toilet, changing diapers, or before eating/preparing food.
- **Sanitize Surfaces:** Regularly disinfect surfaces, especially in kitchens and bathrooms.
- **Avoid Sharing Personal Items:** Don't share utensils, water bottles, or towels.

B. Safe Food Practices

- **Cook Food Thoroughly:** Ensure meat, poultry, and eggs are properly cooked to kill pathogens.
- **Wash Produce:** Clean fruits and vegetables under running water before eating.
- **Refrigerate Leftovers:** Don't leave food out at room temperature for extended periods.
- **Avoid Cross-Contamination:** Use separate cutting boards for raw meat and vegetables.

C. Vaccinations

- **Rotavirus vaccine:** Recommended for infants to protect against rotavirus-induced gastroenteritis.
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2. Foods to Avoid During Gastroenteritis

During a bout of stomach flu, the digestive system is inflamed and highly sensitive. Certain foods can **aggravate symptoms** or **slow recovery**.

A. High-Fat Foods

- Fried foods (e.g., French fries, fried chicken)
- Cheese-heavy dishes (e.g., pizza, lasagna)
- Cream-based sauces or soups

B. Dairy Products

- Milk, cream, cheese, and ice cream may worsen **diarrhea and cramping**, especially in lactose-intolerant individuals.

C. High-Fiber Foods

- Raw vegetables like broccoli and cauliflower
- Whole grains like bran and oats
- Legumes like lentils and black beans

D. Spicy and Acidic Foods

- Chili peppers, hot sauce
- Citrus fruits and tomatoes
- Coffee and carbonated drinks

E. Sugary Foods and Beverages

- Candy, chocolate, sugary cereals
- Fruit juices with high sugar content (especially without pulp)

3. Foods That Help During Gastroenteritis

A **bland, easy-to-digest diet** is essential for recovery. The BRAT diet is a common starting point.

A. BRAT Diet (Bananas, Rice, Applesauce, Toast)

- **Bananas:** High in potassium and easy on the stomach.
- **Rice:** Plain white rice is low-fiber and easy to digest.
- **Applesauce:** Soothes the stomach while providing vitamins.
- **Toast:** Simple carbohydrates that provide energy.

B. Hydrating Fluids

- **Oral rehydration solutions (ORS):** Help replenish lost electrolytes.
- **Coconut water:** Natural electrolytes.
- **Clear broths:** Provide salt and hydration.
- **Ginger tea:** Helps relieve nausea.

C. Other Safe Foods

- **Boiled potatoes**
- **Plain pasta**
- **Steamed carrots**
- **Plain crackers (e.g., saltines)**

Avoid eating large meals. Instead, **consume small, frequent meals** to reduce strain on your digestive system.

4. What to Do if You're Experiencing Gastroenteritis in Halifax

If you are experiencing symptoms such as **nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain, and fever**, follow these steps:

A. Self-Care at Home

1. **Stay Hydrated:** Drink small sips of fluids every 10–15 minutes. Use ORS like **Pedialyte** or **Hydralyte**, which are available at local pharmacies like Lawtons, Shoppers Drug Mart, and Sobeys Pharmacy.
2. **Rest:** Take time off work or school to recover.
3. **Monitor Symptoms:** Watch for signs of dehydration—dry mouth, dizziness, low urine output.

B. When to Seek Medical Attention

Visit a **walk-in clinic or hospital** if you:

- Vomit for more than 48 hours
- Have blood in your stool or vomit
- Experience high fever (over 38.9°C)
- Are unable to keep fluids down
- Show signs of dehydration

In **Halifax**, you can seek help at:

- **QEII Health Sciences Centre – Emergency Department**
- **IWK Health Centre (for children and youth)**
- **Nova Scotia Health walk-in clinics** (see nshealth.ca for updated wait times)

You can also call **811** to speak to a registered nurse for free medical advice 24/7.

5. How to Avoid Gastroenteritis Outbreaks in Nova Scotia

To avoid community-wide outbreaks, particularly in Halifax or public institutions (e.g., universities, care homes), follow these community health guidelines:

A. Avoid Contact

- If you or someone in your household is sick, **avoid preparing food** for others.
- Stay home from school or work for at least **48 hours after symptoms stop**.

B. Public Health Reporting

- Report multiple or severe cases in daycare centers, schools, or nursing homes to **Nova Scotia Public Health**.

C. Travel Safety

- When traveling, **drink bottled or filtered water**, avoid raw foods, and carry hand sanitizer.
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6. Exercises or Natural Remedies That May Support Recovery

While **rest is critical**, some light practices and natural remedies can aid digestion and help you recover faster.

A. Gentle Yoga Poses

- **Child's Pose (Balasana)**: Relieves gas and calms the stomach.
- **Knees-to-Chest Pose (Apanasana)**: Aids digestion and reduces bloating.

These poses should only be done if nausea has reduced.

B. Herbal Remedies

- **Ginger**: Reduces nausea and aids digestion. Can be taken as ginger tea or chewed in small amounts.
- **Peppermint Tea**: Soothes the stomach lining and reduces cramping.

C. Probiotics

- **Yogurt with live cultures** (only after diarrhea subsides): Restores gut flora.

- **Probiotic supplements:** Available over-the-counter and often recommended by pharmacists.
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7. Medications and Physician Treatment for Gastroenteritis

A. Over-the-Counter Medications

- **Loperamide (Imodium):** Used to reduce diarrhea frequency. Not recommended for bacterial infections as it can trap bacteria inside.
- **Acetaminophen (Tylenol):** Helps reduce fever and pain. Avoid ibuprofen on an empty stomach as it can irritate the lining.

B. Prescription Treatment

- **Antibiotics:** Only prescribed if a bacterial cause (e.g., *Campylobacter* or *Salmonella*) is confirmed through stool tests.
- **Antiemetics:** Drugs like **ondansetron** may be used for excessive vomiting.

Do not take antibiotics without physician guidance, as they are not effective against viral causes like norovirus.

C. Rehydration Therapy

In hospitals, patients with severe dehydration may receive:

- **IV fluids** to restore electrolyte balance.
- **Close monitoring** of urine output, heart rate, and blood pressure.

D. Medical Testing

If symptoms persist longer than 7 days, doctors may order:

- **Stool cultures** to identify pathogens.
 - **Blood tests** to assess dehydration and inflammation.
 - **Ultrasound or CT scans** if abdominal pain is severe or localized.
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8. Community Health Support in Nova Scotia

The **Nova Scotia Health Authority (NSHA)** has initiatives to educate communities on food safety, personal hygiene, and infection prevention.

A. Resources Available:

- **811 Telecare Health Line**
- **Online health libraries** at <https://novascotia.ca/dhw/>
- **Community health nurses** available in many regions to support families with illness prevention

If you're a student at **Saint Mary's University**, **Dalhousie University**, or **NSCC**, on-campus health centers also provide guidance and care.

Conclusion

Gastroenteritis or stomach flu is a distressing yet manageable condition when dealt with early and carefully. Nova Scotians, especially in urban areas like Halifax, have access to quality healthcare resources and should follow public health guidance to prevent the spread.

By maintaining personal hygiene, being cautious with food handling, choosing gentle diets during illness, and seeking timely care, individuals can reduce their risk and recover quickly.