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# Viral gastroenteritis (stomach flu)

[Request an appointment](#)[Symptoms & causes](#)[Diagnosis & treatment](#)

On this page

[Diagnosis ↓](#)[Treatment ↓](#)[Self care ↓](#)[Preparing for your appointment ↓](#)

## Diagnosis

Your doctor will likely diagnose viral gastroenteritis (stomach flu) based on symptoms, a physical exam and sometimes on the presence of similar cases in your community. A rapid stool test can detect rotavirus or norovirus, but there are no quick tests for other viruses that cause gastroenteritis. In some cases, your doctor may have you submit a stool sample to rule out a possible bacterial or parasitic infection.

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# Treatment

There's often no specific medical treatment for viral gastroenteritis. Antibiotics aren't effective against viruses. Treatment first involves self-care measures, such as staying hydrated.

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## Self care

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- **Let your stomach settle.** Stop eating solid foods for a few hours.
- **Try sucking on ice chips or taking small sips of water often.** You might also try drinking clear soda, clear broths or noncaffeinated sports drinks. In some cases you can try oral rehydration solutions. Drink plenty of liquid every day, taking small, frequent sips.
- **Ease back into eating.** As you're able, you can return to eating your normal diet. You might find that you can eat bland, easy-to-digest foods at first, such as soda crackers, soup, oats, noodles, bananas and rice. Stop eating if your nausea returns.
- **Avoid certain foods and substances until you feel better.** These include caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, and fatty or highly seasoned foods.
- **Get plenty of rest.** The illness and dehydration may have made you weak and tired.
- **Try anti-diarrhea medications.** Some adults may find it helpful to take loperamide (Imodium A-D) or bismuth subsalicylate (Pepto-Bismol, others) to manage their symptoms. However, avoid these if you have bloody diarrhea or fever, which could be signs of another condition.

### For infants and children

When your child has an intestinal infection, the most important goal is to replace lost fluids and salts. These suggestions may help:

- **Help your child rehydrate.** Give your child an oral rehydration solution, available at pharmacies without a prescription. Talk to your doctor if you have questions about how to use it.

Don't give your child plain water — in children with gastroenteritis, water isn't absorbed well and won't adequately replace lost electrolytes. Avoid giving your child apple juice for rehydration — it can make diarrhea worse.

- **Get your child back to a normal diet once hydrated.** Once your child is

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- **Avoid certain foods.** Don't give your child sugary foods, such as ice cream, sodas and candy. These can make diarrhea worse.
- **Make sure your child gets plenty of rest.** The illness and dehydration may have made your child weak and tired.
- **Avoid giving your child store-bought anti-diarrheal medications,** unless advised by your doctor. They can make it harder for your child's body to get rid of the virus.

If you have a sick infant, let your baby's stomach rest for 15-20 minutes after vomiting or a bout of diarrhea, then offer small amounts of liquid. If you're breast-feeding, let your baby nurse. If your baby is bottle-fed, offer a small amount of an oral rehydration solution or regular formula. Don't dilute your baby's already-prepared formula.

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## Preparing for your appointment

If you or your child needs to see a doctor, you'll likely see your doctor first. If there are questions about the diagnosis, your doctor may refer you to an infectious disease specialist.

### What you can do

Preparing a list of questions will help you make the most of your time with your doctor. Some questions you might want to ask your or your child's doctor include:

- What's the likely cause of the symptoms? Are there other possible causes?
- Is there a need for tests?
- What's the best treatment approach? Are there any alternatives?

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## What to expect from your doctor

Some questions the doctor may ask include:

- When did symptoms begin?
- Have the symptoms been continuous, or do they come and go?
- How severe are the symptoms?
- What, if anything, seems to improve symptoms?
- What, if anything, appears to worsen symptoms?
- Have you been in contact with anyone with similar symptoms?

## What you can do in the meantime

Drink plenty of fluids. As you're able, you can return to eating your normal diet. You might find you can eat bland, easy-to-digest foods at first. If your child is sick, follow the same approach — offer plenty of fluids. When possible, start having your child eat his or her normal diet. If you're breastfeeding or using formula, continue to feed your child as usual. Ask your child's doctor if giving your child an oral rehydration solution, available without a prescription at pharmacies, would help.

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By Mayo Clinic Staff

Apr 30, 2025

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