



[Home](#) → [Medical Encyclopedia](#) → Bacterial gastroenteritis

URL of this page: //medlineplus.gov/ency/article/000254.htm

## Bacterial gastroenteritis

Bacterial gastroenteritis occurs when there is a bacterial infection of your stomach or intestines.

### Causes

Bacterial gastroenteritis can affect one person or a group of people who all ate the same food. It is commonly called food poisoning. It often occurs after eating at picnics, school cafeterias, large social gatherings, or restaurants.

Your food may get infected in many ways:

- Meat or poultry may come into contact with bacteria when the animal is processed.
- Water that is used during growing or shipping may contain animal or human waste.
- Improper food handling or preparation may occur in grocery stores, restaurants, or homes.

Food poisoning often occurs from eating or drinking:

- Food prepared by someone who did not wash their hands properly
- Food prepared using unclean cooking utensils, cutting boards, or other tools
- Dairy products or food containing mayonnaise (such as coleslaw or potato salad) that have been out of the refrigerator too long
- Frozen or refrigerated foods that are not stored at the proper temperature or are not reheated properly
- Raw shellfish such as oysters or clams
- Raw fruits or vegetables that have not been washed well
- Raw vegetable or fruit juices and dairy products (look for the word "pasteurized" to make sure the food is safe to eat or drink)
- Undercooked meats or eggs
- Water from a well or stream, or city or town water that has not been treated

Many different types of bacteria can cause bacterial gastroenteritis, including:

- *Campylobacter jejuni*
- *E coli*

- *Salmonella*
- *Shigella*
- *Staphylococcus aureus*
- *Yersinia*

## Symptoms

Symptoms depend on the type of bacteria that caused the sickness. All types of food poisoning cause diarrhea.

Other symptoms include:

- Abdominal cramps
- Abdominal pain
- Bloody stools
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Fever

## Exams and Tests

Your health care provider will examine you for signs of food poisoning. These may include pain in the stomach and signs your body does not have as much water and fluids as it should (dehydration).

Lab tests may be done on the food or a stool sample to find out what germ is causing your symptoms. However, these tests do not always show the cause of the diarrhea.

Tests may also be done to look for white blood cells in the stool. This is a sign of infection.

## Treatment

You will most likely recover from the most common types of bacterial gastroenteritis in a couple of days. The goal is to make you feel better and avoid dehydration.

Drinking enough fluids and learning what to eat will help ease symptoms. You may need to:

- Manage the diarrhea
- Control nausea and vomiting
- Get plenty of rest

If you have diarrhea and are unable to drink or keep down fluids because of nausea or vomiting, you may need fluids through a vein (IV). Young children may be at extra risk of getting dehydrated.

If you take diuretics ("water pills"), or ACE inhibitors for high blood pressure, contact your provider. You may need to stop taking these medicines while you have diarrhea. Never stop or change your medicines without first checking with your provider.

Antibiotics are not given very often for most common types of bacterial gastroenteritis. If diarrhea is very severe or you have a weak immune system, antibiotics may be needed.

You can buy medicines at the drugstore that can help stop or slow diarrhea. Do not use these medicines without checking with your provider if you have:

- Bloody diarrhea
- Severe diarrhea
- Fever

Do not give these medicines to children.

## **Outlook (Prognosis)**

Most people get better in a few days without treatment.

Certain rare types of *E coli* can cause:

- Severe anemia
- Gastrointestinal bleeding
- Kidney failure

## **When to Contact a Medical Professional**

Contact your provider if you have:

- Blood or pus in your stools, or your stool is black
- Diarrhea with a fever above 101°F (38.33°C) or 100.4°F (38°C) in children
- Recently traveled to a foreign country and developed diarrhea
- Stomach pain that does not go away after a bowel movement
- Symptoms of dehydration (thirst, dizziness, lightheadedness)

Also contact your provider if:

- The diarrhea gets worse or does not get better in 2 days for an infant or child, or 5 days for adults
- A child over 3 months old has been vomiting for more than 12 hours; in younger babies, call as soon as vomiting or diarrhea begins

## **Prevention**

Take precautions to prevent food poisoning.

## **Alternative Names**

Infectious diarrhea - bacterial gastroenteritis; Acute gastroenteritis; Gastroenteritis - bacterial

## **References**

Kotloff KL. Acute gastroenteritis in children. In: Kliegman RM, St. Geme JW, Blum NJ, Shah SS, Tasker RC, Wilson KM, eds. *Nelson Textbook of Pediatrics*. 21st ed. Philadelphia, PA: Elsevier; 2020:chap 366.

Nguyen T, Akhtar S. Gastroenteritis. In: Walls RM, ed. *Rosen's Emergency Medicine: Concepts and Clinical Practice*. 10th ed. Philadelphia, PA: Elsevier; 2023:chap 80.

Schiller LR, Sellin JH. Diarrhea. In: Feldman M, Friedman LS, Brandt LJ, eds. *Sleisenger and Fordtran's Gastrointestinal and Liver Disease: Pathophysiology/Diagnosis/Management*. 11th ed. Philadelphia, PA: Elsevier; 2021:chap 16.

Wong KK, Griffin PM. Foodborne disease. In: Bennett JE, Dolin R, Blaser MJ, eds. *Mandell, Douglas, and Bennett's Principles and Practice of Infectious Diseases*. 9th ed. Philadelphia, PA: Elsevier; 2020:chap 101.

## Review Date 12/31/2023

Updated by: Jenifer K. Lehrer, MD, Department of Gastroenterology, Aria - Jefferson Health Torresdale, Jefferson Digestive Diseases Network, Philadelphia, PA. Review provided by VeriMed Healthcare Network. Also reviewed by David C. Dugdale, MD, Medical Director, Brenda Conaway, Editorial Director, and the A.D.A.M. Editorial team.

### Learn how to cite this page



Health Content  
Provider  
06/01/2028

A.D.A.M., Inc. is accredited by URAC, for Health Content Provider ([www.urac.org](http://www.urac.org)). URAC's [accreditation program](#) is an independent audit to verify that A.D.A.M. follows rigorous standards of quality and accountability. A.D.A.M. is among the first to achieve this important distinction for online health information and services. Learn more about A.D.A.M.'s [editorial policy](#), [editorial process](#), and [privacy policy](#).

The information provided herein should not be used during any medical emergency or for the diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. A licensed medical professional should be consulted for diagnosis and treatment of any and all medical conditions. Links to other sites are provided for information only – they do not constitute endorsements of those other sites. No warranty of any kind, either expressed or implied, is made as to the accuracy, reliability, timeliness, or correctness of any translations made by a third-party service of the information provided herein into any other language. © 1997-2025 A.D.A.M., a business unit of Ebix, Inc. Any duplication or distribution of the information contained herein is strictly prohibited.



National Library of Medicine 8600 Rockville Pike, Bethesda, MD 20894 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

National Institutes of Health