

Frequently Asked Questions about...

Gastrointestinal illnesses

Q. What is a gastrointestinal illness?

A. A gastrointestinal (GI) illness is an infection that primarily affects the gastrointestinal system, most commonly the stomach, small intestine, and large intestine. Most gastrointestinal illnesses are caused by bacteria or viruses, although sometimes toxins created by bacteria can also cause illness.

Q. What are the symptoms of gastrointestinal illnesses?

A. Most gastrointestinal illnesses present with similar symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Occasionally, fever, abdominal cramps, and headache or body aches may also occur. Symptoms will vary in severity depending on the specific infection. Illnesses last for a variety of time, depending on the causative agent. Some gastrointestinal illnesses last as few as 24 hours, while others may last for several days.

Q. How does someone contract a gastrointestinal illness?

A. Gastrointestinal illnesses are spread when infectious microorganisms found in an ill person's stool are transferred to a healthy individual. It is possible to transfer these microorganisms through direct contact with an ill person (most frequently hand-to-hand contact) or via contaminated food, water, ice, or other objects that have been handled by an ill person. Improper preparation of food, including handling of raw items, and improper cooking, may also result in a gastrointestinal illness.

Q. Why may patients in healthcare facilities be at risk for contracting a gastrointestinal illness?

A. Patients may be at an increased risk for gastrointestinal illness for a variety of reasons. Many patients have chronic underlying health conditions or weakened immune systems that make it easier for them to become sick. Patients, visitors, or staff may carry the virus and spread it to others in close contact if they do not perform appropriate hand hygiene.

Q. Can gastrointestinal illnesses be treated?

A. Yes, but gastrointestinal illnesses will often resolve on their own. Depending on the specific illness and the severity of symptoms, medical attention might be necessary and that may range from supportive care to the administration of antibiotics.

Q. What is the best way to prevent a gastrointestinal illness?

A. The best way to prevent gastrointestinal illnesses is to practice good hand hygiene. Hands should be washed vigorously in soapy water for at least 15-20 seconds. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers may also be effective if soap and water are not available. Environmental cleaning and proper storage, handling, and preparation of food items are also important ways to prevent gastrointestinal illness.

Contact your local health department if you have additional questions about gastrointestinal illnesses