

Communicable Diseases Branch

Communicable Diseases and Infection Management
Gastroenteritis

Current Gastroenteritis Outbreaks in South-East Queensland 18 November 2020

- There are currently ongoing cases and outbreaks of gastrointestinal illness among students in a number of facilities, including schools within the South East Queensland (SEQ) Region.
- Since the beginning of October there have been 128 outbreaks reported in childcare settings (includes special schools) in SEQ. This compares with 94 from January to September 2020.
- Gastroenteritis (commonly called 'gastro') is an infection of the bowel usually caused by a virus (type of germ). Symptoms may include diarrhoea (runny, watery bowel motions), vomiting or both.
- Many school aged children have younger siblings in early childhood education and care services and as gastro is so easily transmitted within families/household contacts we would like to take this opportunity to raise awareness regarding gastroenteritis outbreaks, their management and available resources.
- Gastro can spread when a person with gastroenteritis vomits or has diarrhoea. The germ can spread directly by contaminated hands or by touching a contaminated surface.
- Spread of gastroenteritis (gastro) can be prevented with good hand hygiene (old fashioned liquid soap and water is more effective against gastro viruses than hand rub) and staying at home while unwell or potentially infectious.
- If you've had gastro symptoms, Public Health recommend you/your child should not return to work, childcare or school until 48 hours after the symptoms completely stop.

To stop the spread of viral gastroenteritis – stay away from group settings if you or your child could be infectious.

Someone with viral gastroenteritis is most infectious while they have symptoms and for at least 48 hours after the symptoms have stopped.

Even after this time frame, some viruses can still be present in body fluids, therefore it is essential to always practice recommended hand hygiene and infection control including effective cleaning processes.

Viral gastro can occur when a virus infects a person (child or adult) causing diarrhoea and/or vomiting. Other symptoms may include nausea, stomach cramps, fever, headache and

muscle aches. Viral gastroenteritis disrupts normal activities and can be serious in the very young or the very old, sometimes causing dehydration.

Gastroenteritis outbreaks in early childhood education and care services and schools can be disruptive to staff and families that attend the centre, impacting on staff attendance as well as parent's work life.

It takes about 1–3 days to develop symptoms and the illness may last a day or two. The diagnosis of viral gastroenteritis is normally made on the basis of symptoms and testing of faeces or vomit.

Tell your doctor if you or your sick child has been in contact with other people/children with similar symptoms.

Outbreaks commonly occur in settings such as early childhood education and care services and schools. The onset of vomiting and/or diarrhoea in a number of people over a period of 1–3 days suggests that the infection is spreading within the childcare centre or school.

In an outbreak, Public Health may provide a letter for parents to take with their child if medical assessment is required. The letter contains recommendations for tests that may assist to identify the cause of the outbreak.

Anyone with concerns should talk to their GP or get free advice from a qualified health professional by calling 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84).

Are gastro symptoms a sign of COVID-19?

Nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea have been added to the list of COVID-19 symptoms; talk to your doctor for more information or advice.

Why do we need to stay away from childcare or other group settings if the symptoms have stopped?

The key message is that unwell staff and children should not attend childcare centres and other group settings until 48 hours after the symptoms have completely resolved.

Someone with viral gastroenteritis is most infectious while they have the symptoms and for at least 48 hours after the symptoms have stopped.

Viral gastroenteritis (such as norovirus) is highly infectious.

It can be spread by:

- Person-to-person contact (for instance when the virus is on people's hands).
- Through the air (when a person vomits, large amounts of virus particles pass into the air as an invisible mist and can infect other people in the same room).
- When hands, food, objects and surfaces become contaminated with faeces or vomit and the infectious organism is transferred to the mouth when eating, drinking or touching the mouth.
- People infected with norovirus should not prepare food while they have symptoms and for 48 hours after they recover from their illness. Food that may have been prepared by an ill person should be disposed of.

What sort of hand hygiene is best to prevent gastro?

After using the toilet or helping a child with toileting, it is always best to wash your hands with liquid soap and water for at least 20 seconds. When gastro is about, it is even more important to wash your hands the old-fashioned way - with soap and water!

Alcohol based hand rubs are generally a great on the go tool, but with certain bugs that cause gastro symptoms, they just aren't very effective. So, to be on the safe side, use a liquid soap, wash all surfaces of hands for at least 20 seconds, and rinse and dry well.