



How to cope with a viral stomach upset

You can be forgiven for thinking that the country's current scourge of diarrhoea and vomiting and other stomach upsets are as a result of Christmas excess. Such viral infections are common in winter months, probably due to the fact that we spend more time cooped up inside and are not able to get out and about and enjoy our surroundings.

The current epidemic of stomach upsets are probably as a result of a number of viral infections, the technical term is gastroenteritis, which includes nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and diarrhoea, this is also known as 'Winter Vomiting Disease' for obvious reasons.

A number of viruses are incriminated, one of which is the Norwalk virus, sometimes termed the norovirus, which has been the focus of recent articles in the UK media.

Because this is a virus infection, there are no specific curative treatments as there are with bacterial infections, such as antibiotics. The secret is to starve the virus out of the body and to flush out the virus from the stomach and the rest of the gastrointestinal tract.

The winter stomach upset viruses produce self limiting symptoms. They are highly infectious and the symptoms of vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal pain, nausea, muscle ache, headaches, general malaise and low grade temperatures normally last for between 24 and 48 hours. Sometimes they can last up to 72 hours. Individuals are thought to be infectious for a further 48 hours after the diarrhoea stops as they may well still be excreting the virus and should take care when going to the toilet, particularly washing their hands afterwards.

There is little information with regards to how infectious individuals are prior to developing symptoms. Some specialists believe that there may be an incubation period of up to three days.

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Having had the infection, you are most likely to be protected against other similar virus infections involving the stomach and gastrointestinal tract for approximately three months. There is no long lasting protection or immunity.

If you develop symptoms, which may be all or a number of the symptoms mentioned above, it is important that you rest and during the acute symptoms lasting approximately 48 hours, that you take no solid food but attempt to drink plenty of water. If you are being sick, rest your stomach for approximately 2 hours before beginning to take small amounts of water (an eggcup full or approximately 5ml) at a time, beginning at 15 minute intervals and slowly increasing the amount of fluid you take. It is important, during this phase of the symptoms, that you replace the fluid that you are losing by drinking approximately 2-3 litres of fluid a day as a minimum. This will flush out the virus. Once the vomiting has stopped, approximately 12 hours, you can commence a very light diet of dry biscuits, dry toast and then move on to chicken or other bland foods.

To protect family members and colleagues, it is important that you practice good personal hygiene. **WASH YOUR HANDS THOROUGHLY** after going to the toilet, dry them well.

Some doctors advise using anti diarrhoea medication such as Imodium or other medications that can be bought over the counter in supermarkets or chemists. In general, this type of medication will prolong symptoms as it blocks the body's natural reaction to clear the virus from the stomach and gastrointestinal tract. Such medication can be useful if you have to travel, or have an important meeting, but please be aware that your symptoms may be extended by 24 hours or so, if such medication is taken. This type of medication should not be taken on a regular basis unless you are advised by your doctor.

Within the workplace, once the severe symptoms have settled and employees practice good personal hygiene, particularly washing their hands after going to the toilet, there is no reason why employees cannot return to work. Managers may consider providing additional hand cleansing agents within the workplace, particularly if employees are required to lift and handle secondary food packaging. The management of employees who are considered to be 'food handlers' is entirely different and much more strict and those managers concerned should be fully aware of the current UK food handling regulations in respect of gastrointestinal symptoms.

If we can be of any further assistance at Preventative Healthcare, giving advice on particular cases of advising you with regards to further initiatives that can be made available to employees, particularly with regards to cleansing agents, etc., please do not hesitate to contact Penny Lovelock on 01622 775289 or email: p.lovelock@phcohealth.co.uk

Follow up on our Christmas Quiz – How much is too much?

A recent article on our professional medical journals recommended that men should drink no more than 2 units of alcohol per day and women no more than 1 unit per day. These recommendations come from the World Cancer Research Fund and are much lower than the UK Government advice that is currently published. This information also highlights a widespread confusion with regards to units of alcohol and what are considered ‘standard drinks’.

The international assumption is that standard alcoholic drinks contain between 10 and 15g of ethanol, the British standard drink contains 8g of ethanol.

Currently, doctors advise in the UK that one unit is taken as one drink (half a pint of beer or one glass of wine). This is not the case! One pint of beer (4.2%) contains 4.2 units and a 175ml glass of wine (12%) contains 2.1 units.

The current UK Department of Health guidance is to use smaller glasses! This could only come from civil servants! The UK Government advises that a 125ml glass of wine contains one unit. This would be true if the alcohol content was 1%, but at a more typical 12% it actually contains 1.5 units. Standard drinks vary across the world. The latest report from the World Cancer Research Fund explains why drinks across the world have a wide range of ethanol content. It is therefore important to be fully aware of the alcohol content of your drinks as this could have significant implications, not only to health, but also to safety. In short BE CAREFUL.

Preventative Healthcare wishes you a Happy New Year!

For any occupational health issues please contact
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