

House Calls

Stomach 'Flu' Tips

By Rikki Schuster, PA-C

The stomach 'flu' is one of those illnesses that we all suffer from one time or another, but when you or someone you love is in the middle of the tortuous illness, you feel like you are the only one in the world who could possibly be feeling this bad. I find that the toughest thing about it, both as someone who has suffered from it, and as a medical provider is that there is usually absolutely nothing you can do to 'cure' it. When people call me in misery telling me they have been running to the bathroom for the last 4 hours, and all I can say is 'let it run its course', there is something very helpless about that situation. Knowing the facts about what is typically called the stomach flu is a good way to protect you and your family from more serious conditions like severe dehydration.

Many people refer to the stomach flu when they are sick to their stomach with vomiting and diarrhea. However, this should not be confused with influenza, or the flu, which typically has symptoms of high fever, congestion, fatigue, and muscle aches. The proper term for stomach flu is gastroenteritis, or inflammation of the stomach and intestines (gastrointestinal tract). It may be caused by a virus, bacteria, parasites in spoiled food or unclean water, or another trigger such as lactose intolerance, which causes a reaction to dairy products. The actual symptoms of gastroenteritis include abdominal cramps, stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. You may also experience headache, low grade fever, and lightheadedness. In severe cases of gastroenteritis, loss of bodily fluid may result in dehydration, which can be a life threatening situation that requires medical attention. Signs of dehydration include sunken eyes, increased thirst, dry or sticky mucous membranes in the mouth, lack of normal elasticity in the skin, decreased urination, and decreased tears. You can avoid dehydration by continuing to drink fluids and gradually introducing the BRAT (bananas, rice, applesauce, and toast) diet. The fluids I usually recommend are water, and watered down electrolyte sports drink. Some people find that small sips of ginger ale settle the stomach as well. A bland diet, like the BRAT diet is usually easily digested and is

unlikely to further irritate your sensitive gastrointestinal tract.

There are many causes of the stomach flu including bacteria such as e.coli and salmonella, however 40% of gastroenteritis is caused by viruses such as the Norwalk virus and rotovirus. Stomach viruses are notorious for spreading due to poor hand washing. While not as common, parasites can also cause severe diarrhea and dehydration. Water borne parasites are more common in underdeveloped parts of the world that have unsanitary water supplies. It is recommended that travelers stick to bottled water to avoid water-borne parasites- a potential cause of gastroenteritis. Those at high risk for stomach flu include pregnant women, infants, undernourished or immune compromised people and older adults. In addition, the severity of the illness depends on your immune system's ability to resist the infection. The best way to avoid the illness, as with most contagious illnesses is to practice adequate hand washing techniques. If you do experience the stomach flu, there are a few signs you should look out for that you would want to seek medical attention. That is if you feel you cannot drink fluids, or cannot keep down fluids, and are continually losing fluid through fever, vomiting, and diarrhea, you may be dehydrated, and should seek medical help. Other signs that warrant medical intervention include: blood in vomit or stool, fever higher than 101, swollen abdomen, or pain in the right, lower part of the abdomen, vomiting that lasts more than 48 hours. I certainly hope that you can get through this winter without experiencing the dreaded stomach flu, but if you find you were not able to avoid it, just remember the main thing you need to remember is to try to stay hydrated.

Rikki Schuster, PA-C is a certified Physician Assistant with 12 years of experience practicing medicine. She is currently accepting new patients through Medical House Calls and can be reached at (252) 475-2007. www.obxmedicalhousecalls.com