

Stomach flu



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Neenah Joint School District Health & Wellness Center

Mon. 7 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Tues. 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Wed. 7 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Thurs. 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Fri. 7 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Continuing our discussion of common illnesses, let's talk about stomach flu. It is important to note that this is a different illness from influenza, which is a respiratory illness for which we provide seasonal vaccination. Stomach flu is a general term for illness involving the gastrointestinal system (stomach and bowels), and can have varying degrees of presentation based on the age and immune status of the patient. Children and adults will have diarrhea and will often have fever, abdominal pain, and/or vomiting. Additional symptoms may include poor appetite, headaches, and muscles aches. These symptoms last three to nine days, and will usually be most severe in the first day or two. Often the diarrhea will outlast all other symptoms.

Most cases of stomach flu are caused by a virus- usually norovirus, although children are more susceptible to other viruses than adults are. There is not a norovirus vaccine available, but children are routinely vaccinated against rotavirus, one of the other common causes of viral stomach flu. Washing your hands frequently- especially after using the bathroom, assisting a child in the bathroom, and before eating or preparing food- is the most effective way to prevent stomach flu.

Stomach flu is typically treated with rest and hydration. This is especially important for babies, children, and the elderly, who are more susceptible to dehydration. During an episode of stomach flu, focusing on taking small but frequent sips of clear liquids such as water can usually assure hydration. However, if there is vomiting or the diarrhea is just too significant for these measures, dehydration can occur. This may look like lethargy, increased sleeping, sunken eyes or soft spot in babies, decreased urination, lack of tears when crying, and increased thirst. These are all reasons to seek medical evaluation.

Stomach flu can also be caused by bacteria, but this is much less common. If diarrhea is severe (more than 4 watery stools daily for 3 days or more), if there is visible blood in the stool, or if the illness takes place after an exposure to a known outbreak of foodborne illness, a bacterial cause may be to blame. Medical attention with further evaluation and likely an antibiotic is then needed.

After an episode of stomach flu, the energy level can take some time to normalize. This is an illness that can leave you feeling drained. In addition, difficulty digesting dairy can continue for up to a few weeks after a profound episode of watery diarrhea. Dairy products should be the last food group reintroduced if there has been significant diarrhea.