

Know the FACTS

Gastrointestinal (GI) Illnesses

Viruses, bacteria and parasites all can cause gastrointestinal (GI) illnesses. Most people recover within 1-3 days, but some illnesses last longer or lead to other issues. GI illnesses can be very contagious, so avoid spreading them to others and recognize when it's time to seek medical care.

Causes and symptoms

Although many people often refer to a GI illness as a "stomach bug" or "stomach flu," a variety of viruses, bacteria and parasites can generate similar symptoms, making it difficult to know exactly what caused the illness.

Common GI illnesses include:

- Norovirus
- Escherichia coli (E. coli)
- Campylobacter
- Cyclospora
- Salmonella
- Listeria
- Cryptosporidium ("Crypto")

Because these illnesses often have similar symptoms, it's difficult to identify the cause without testing. GI symptoms typically include:

- watery diarrhea
- nausea and vomiting
- abdominal cramps
- loss of appetite



How GI illnesses spread

Viruses, bacteria, parasites and other pathogens can contaminate food, water, surfaces, or people and animals. When humans are exposed to these pathogens through contact or proximity, that can cause GI illnesses.

Common sources of exposure include but are not limited to:

- **Food:** eating contaminated or undercooked foods, unwashed fruits and vegetables or drinking unpasteurized (raw) milk or apple cider.
- **Recreational water:** swallowing contaminated water in swimming pools, splash pads, water parks, lakes and rivers.
- **Drinking water:** consuming untreated or inadequately treated water from lakes, streams or shallow wells.
- **Surfaces:** touching contaminated cutting boards or restroom items, or sharing utensils and drinking glasses.
- **Contact:** touching infected animals (such as at petting zoos or farms), caring for someone who is sick or changing diapers without proper handwashing.



**HAMILTON COUNTY
PUBLIC HEALTH**

1701 Patricia McCollum Way, Dept. 93 (5th floor)
Cincinnati, Ohio 45237 | 513.946.7800 | hcph.org
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Treatment and prevention

Most GI illnesses can be managed by drinking plenty of fluids — especially water and sports drinks — to replace lost electrolytes and prevent dehydration. Some infections may require additional treatment or prescription medications. Contact your healthcare provider if your symptoms are severe, last longer than a few days, or if you notice signs of dehydration, bloody diarrhea, high fever or other concerning symptoms.

Reduce the risk of GI illnesses:

- **Wash your hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds** after using the restroom, changing diapers, handling animals, and before and after preparing or eating food.
- Properly disinfect all high-touch or high-traffic surface areas, especially those in the kitchen and restroom.
- **Avoid swallowing water from pools, splash pads, lakes and other recreational water sources.**
- Drink only treated water and avoiding unpasteurized milk or apple cider.
- **Wash fresh fruits and vegetables thoroughly** before eating.
- Cook meat, poultry, eggs and seafood to safe internal temperatures.
- **Keep hot foods at 135°F or above** while serving.

- **Refrigerating perishable foods within two hours** (or within one hour if the temperature is above 90°F.)
- **Staying home if you have diarrhea or vomiting**, especially if you work in food service, healthcare, childcare or other settings where illness can spread easily.



Additional resources:

- **Hamilton County Public Health division of environmental health:** bit.ly/HCPHEnvHealth
- **Ohio Department of Health:** bit.ly/ODH-FoodborneDisease
- **United States Department of Agriculture:** bit.ly/USDA-FoodbornIllness