DIARRHOEA AND VOMITING

What is it?

Diarrhoea and vomiting can be caused by an infection giving a stomach upset. It may be caused by a number of different bugs including viruses (such as rotavirus or norwalk virus), parasites (such as amoeba or giardia) and bacteria (such as salmonella, E coli 0157 or campylobacter). These are usually contracted from food, but some can be passed directly from person to person.

How do I know if someone has it?

The main symptoms include diarrhoea, vomiting, nausea, abdominal pain and fever. Different bugs can cause different symptoms, but the same bug can cause different symptoms in different people.

Is it infectious?

Not always. Infection is usually caused by eating infected food or drinking infected water. It can sometimes be spread directly from person to person, especially if hygiene is poor as with young children. It can be spread if someone who is ill prepares food for others.

What is the incubation period?

This varies from a few hours to a few days, depending on the bug and how much infected food was eaten.

Is there any treatment?

Most people will get better with no treatment. For some infections antibiotics may not be helpful. One or two of the less common bugs may require specific treatment.

What should I do if someone has the illness?

- At first, the infected person should drink plenty of clear fluids and try not to eat. Water, non-fizzy fruit drinks and tea without milk are good.
- If the symptoms last for over 24 hours, or there is blood in the diarrhoea, the person should contact their GP.
- If it is a particular nuisance, the frequency of the diarrhoea can be reduced in adults. Ask a Pharmacist or your GP for advice on which tablet is appropriate. These can be bought at the chemist. These and similar medicine should not be used by children, except on the advice of a doctor.
- Personal hygiene should be very strict. Everyone should always wash their hands with warm soapy water after going to the toilet and before handling food.
- If possible, the person who is ill should not prepare food for others.
- The toilet should be kept clean. Make sure that the seat and handle are cleaned.

How soon can someone with the illness return to school or work?

In general people should stay away from work or school until they have been free of symptoms for 24 hours. Children under 5 and those with learning difficulties, who cannot maintain good hygiene, may require a longer period of exclusion. Those who handle food as part of their work should check with their employers and GP before returning.

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