



University of North Carolina Wilmington
Abrons Student Health Center

INSTRUCTION SHEET: GI UPSET (VOMITING/DIARRHEA)

The Student Health Provider has diagnosed a GI upset. The most common cause of vomiting and diarrhea is a viral infection in the GI tract (stomach and intestine). Other causes include food poisoning (toxins or bacteria), and bacterial infections.

In most cases, no specific antidote or cure exists for GI upset. Instead, treatment is supportive and symptomatic until the body can purge itself of infection/toxin.

A change in diet is the key to successful treatment of GI upset. When the intestine and stomach are stressed, putting complex, solid food into the stomach often makes the condition worse. Solid food is hard to digest; also, the body can do without solid food far longer than it can without liquids. Clear liquids are most easily tolerated by the GI tract, and liquids help prevent dehydration.

Dehydration is a prime concern with GI upset. The body loses fluid through vomiting and diarrhea, and vomiting delays replacement of fluids by mouth. Time and medication will decrease vomiting. Intravenous fluids may be necessary to rehydrate the body if enough fluids are lost.

MEASURES YOU SHOULD TAKE TO HELP TREAT YOUR GI UPSET:

1. **Rest your stomach and intestine.** Listen to your body. Do not force anything by mouth until you feel thirsty. Then begin with clear liquids, not milk or solid food. Clear liquids are fluids without solid particles; examples include: water, sports drinks, soft drinks, kool-aid, and weak tea. Start with sips, taking no more than 1/2 cup at a time. Gradually increase to larger amounts if you have no cramping or vomiting.
2. Once you are taking *plenty* of liquids without cramping, vomiting, or diarrhea, *gradually* resume a normal diet. Begin with simple foods such as broth, soups, toast, crackers, mashed potatoes, and rice. If these solids are tolerated, then *gradually* resume a normal diet. Be patient. If solids cause symptoms, then go back to a liquid diet.
3. Medications rarely help much in treating diarrhea. Experts advise that medications can actually delay clearing of diarrhea by keeping the body from purging the intestine. Medications are available to treat nausea/vomiting. Dramamine (dimenhydrinate) is available over-the-counter. Prescription suppositories or pills can also treat nausea/vomiting.
4. Should your condition worsen, call/return to the Student Health Center for reevaluation or go to the nearest emergency department. Seek care *promptly* for: severe abdominal pain (more than cramping), blood in the vomit or stool, fever higher than 103, or dehydration. Signs of dehydration include: mouth appearing dry/sticky (not moist and shiny), sunken eyes, decreased urination (less than twice a day), doughy skin, lethargy (excessive sleepiness), and dizziness on standing..