



Rotavirus Fact Sheet

What is rotavirus?

Rotavirus is a virus (germ) that can cause severe diarrhea, usually with fever and vomiting. Rotavirus is the most common cause of severe gastroenteritis (vomiting and diarrhea) in infants and young children in the United States. Rotavirus disease can cause children to lose body fluids very quickly and is especially dangerous for children less than 2 years of age. Children between 3 and 35 months of age have the highest risk for getting the infection.

How severe is rotavirus disease?

In the first 5 years of life, four of five children in the United States will develop rotavirus disease, one in seven will require a clinic or emergency room visit, one in 78 will require hospitalization, and it is estimated that one in 200,000 children die from rotavirus diarrhea.

What are the symptoms of rotavirus disease?

Rotavirus disease usually starts with upset stomach and vomiting, often with fever, followed by diarrhea. The watery diarrhea can be mild to severe and generally will last for 3 to 7 days. Severe diarrhea can lead to a dangerous depletion of body fluids called dehydration, which can result in death if untreated. Virtually all children become infected with rotavirus in the first 3 to 5 years of life, but severe diarrhea and dehydration occur mainly among children aged 3 to 35 months.

How is rotavirus spread?

Rotavirus is very easy to catch. Large amounts of rotavirus are present in the stool of infected persons, and rotavirus is easily spread on contaminated hands and objects. Children can spread rotavirus both before and after they become sick with diarrhea. They can sometimes pass the virus to other members of the family and close contacts. In the United States, rotavirus infections can cause diarrhea in adults, especially those caring for children but less often than in children.

What can be done to prevent rotavirus disease?

There is no effective way to completely eliminate rotavirus infection or its transmission. Washing with soaps or cleansers does not kill the virus, but careful hand washing will help prevent spread of rotavirus. Clean water supplies and improved hygiene have not decreased rotavirus diarrhea in countries with good sanitation systems.

How is rotavirus disease treated?

Giving special fluids by mouth (oral rehydration therapy) is the most effective treatment. Oral rehydration also can prevent most cases of dehydration and replaces the minerals (e.g., salt and potassium) that can be lost in patients with vomiting and diarrhea. Parents who are concerned that their child might have severe vomiting or diarrhea should start oral rehydration and take their child for medical evaluation.

Rotavirus Fact Sheet

(continued from previous page)

Special fluids used for oral rehydration can be found in most pharmacies or grocery stores and can be purchased without a prescription. In some cases, hydration fluids must be given intravenously (by IV), so prompt medical attention is important if you suspect that your child is dehydrated.

Is there a vaccine to prevent rotavirus disease?

No vaccines are currently available to prevent rotavirus disease, but new vaccines may be approved and recommended for children in the United States in the next 1-2 years.

Can a person get rotavirus disease more than once?

Yes, but usually each new infection is milder and less likely to cause dehydration than previous infections.

For more information, visit www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters/hurricanes,
or call CDC at 800-CDC-INFO (English and Spanish) or 888-232-6348 (TTY).

April 12, 2005

Page 2 of 2