

## Recurring flu symptoms or something else? <sup>[1]</sup>

Dear Alice,

For the past two or three weeks, myself, my wife, and my kids have had flu symptoms on and off. We'll have nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea for about 24 hours, it will go away for a day or two, and then come back. It concerns me as this is not the normal cycle we are accustomed to with the flu. I almost feel we need blood tests or antibiotics or something. What could this be and why does it keep reoccurring?

### **Answer**

Dear Reader,

Repeated bouts of illness can be confusing and scary, especially when they're happening to your entire family. Contacting a health care provider regarding you and your family's health may help you get the most answers, as it could be a number of reasons behind what your family is experiencing. In the meantime, consider also looking out for signs of dehydration. Vomiting and diarrhea can both lead to this, and children are known to be especially susceptible. However, bed rest and lots of fluids may help dehydration from becoming a reality.

There are many potential causes of the symptoms you have reported. Based on what you've described, one possibility is that you and your family are experiencing stints of stomach flu rather than influenza <sup>[2]</sup>. Influenza is known to have respiratory symptoms that impact the nose, throat, and lungs, whereas the stomach flu, also known as viral gastroenteritis, involves your intestines and includes symptoms such as diarrhea, nausea, throwing up, stomach pains, muscle aches, and fever. Stomach flu symptoms usually show up one to three days after being infected and typically last for one to two days, although a person may experience symptoms for up to ten days. The stomach flu is known to easily spread by way of contaminated water, food sources, and sometimes person-to-person if sharing food, drinks, or other household items with someone sick. Children often get infected by putting their hands in their mouths after touching contaminated objects.

Note that signs of dehydration look different for adults and children, although treatment and prevention methods are similar. A dehydrated adult may experience intense thirst, reduced need to urinate, darker urine, fatigue, confusion, and dizziness. In children, watch out for noticeably

more sunken spots on the top of their heads, sunken eyes and cheeks, and dry mouths and tongues. In addition, children experiencing dehydration may not tear up when crying, and like adults, experience less frequent urination. To prevent dehydration, experts suggest making sure you and your family are drinking plenty of fluids — over-the-counter oral hydration solutions are often recommended for children and are used by adults as well. Bed rest and eating food with higher water content such as fruits and vegetables may also help. Since dehydration can lead to other serious health risks, experts advise calling your health care provider to determine the best course of treatment.

If your family is simultaneously becoming ill, becoming better, and becoming ill again, you may all have been exposed to something in your environment that prompts the illness. Some helpful ways to prevent exposure include:

- Getting children vaccinated for gastroenteritis and rotavirus
- Washing your hands [3] (for at least 20 seconds!), and using hand sanitizer when water and soap aren't available
- Ensuring each family member uses separate utensils, cups, plates, and towels, and discouraging the sharing of these items
- Avoiding contact with a person who has a contagious illness
- Sanitizing home surfaces like counters, faucets, and doorknobs

*Adapted from Mayo Clinic [4].*

Unfortunately, it's hard to know for sure what is causing your family's troubles. However, the good news is that a health care provider may be able to provide more guidance on what's going on and how to prevent future illness. Good luck and feel better soon!

Alice!

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