

Preventing spread of disease in areas affected by bushfires

People affected by extreme bushfires in Tasmania may be at greater risk of gastroenteritis (gastro) and other diseases that spread from person to person.

These sorts of illnesses can be harder to control where people are living closely together with limited facilities.

If you're in an evacuation or recovery centre, tell the centre coordinator if you or someone you care for becomes unwell with diarrhoea (runny poo), vomiting, stomach pains or fever.

This is important so staff and health services can take steps to slow the spread of illness. Elderly people, infants and people with medical conditions can become very ill with gastro.

What is gastro?

Gastro is an infection of the intestines (the bowel). It is common and is always around in the community.

It is often caused by viruses but can also be caused by bacteria and parasites.

Common symptoms of gastro are diarrhoea, sometimes with nausea, vomiting, stomach pains and fever.

Symptoms usually last a couple of days but sometimes for as long as a week.

Nausea and vomiting due to motion sickness (sea-sickness) that settles soon after reaching land is unpleasant but is not a gastro infection.

How can I prevent gastro?

Gastro spreads easily from person to person, mostly from close personal contact and from contact with contaminated objects (eg if you touch something that has been contaminated and then touch your mouth).

It can also spread via food and water.

You can protect yourself and others from gastro by following these steps:

1. Clean your hands by washing them with soap and water for at least 15 seconds and drying them (a disposable paper towel is best), and/or by using an alcohol-based hand gel:
 - whenever they are dirty
 - after going to the toilet or changing nappies
 - before handling food, drinks or eating utensils.
2. Eat safe food and drink safe water:
 - keep cold food cold (below 5 degrees C) and hot food hot (above 60 degrees C)
 - cook frozen or perishable food (such as meat or cooked meals) as soon as it is thawed; otherwise, throw it out
 - cook foods thoroughly
 - drink safe water: commercially bottled water, boiled water or water supplied by the emergency services.

What should I do if I get gastro?

1. Look after yourself

- Drink plenty of fluids. Water or rehydration drinks (from pharmacies) are best. The most common complication of diarrhoea is dehydration. Babies, children and the elderly are most at risk of dehydration.
- If you're alone at home, let a family member or friend know you are ill.
- Consider seeking medical care if you are particularly unwell.

2. Protect others

- If you're in an evacuation or recovery centre, please tell the centre coordinator you are ill as soon as possible. They'll help you get medical care and can take steps to help slow the spread of illness to others in the centre. Elderly people, infants and people with medical conditions can become very ill with gastro.
- Be super fussy about cleanliness. Clean your hands with soap and water (drying them with a disposable paper towel is best), and/or an alcohol-based hand gel thoroughly after going to the toilet.
- Do not prepare or serve food for others, or share food or drinks, until you've been well again for 48 hours.
- Always cover a cough or sneeze with a tissue or the inside of your elbow.

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