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Summertime is picnic and barbeque time for many people. It is a relaxed time - at the beach or our favourite camping spots, but we can get a little bit lax about good food handling, cooking and storage practices. It can mean holidays are spoiled by an outbreak of acute diarrhoea and vomiting that comes on quickly and severely. The usual cause is a gut infection ('gastro') from viruses, bacteria or parasites, often from contaminated food or water. Leaving food out of the fridge, possibly in the sun and uncovered, is a common cause for food going off due to contamination.

In many cases, the gastro is only a short-term inconvenience and the diarrhoea and vomiting tend to go away within a few days. It becomes a problem if the symptoms go on for longer (more than three days for adults and older children) and get worse, if you cannot keep down any food or drink and you feel very unwell. At this point you should see your doctor.

Vomiting and diarrhoea causes the loss of body fluids and important electrolytes and can result in dehydration. Children under twelve months of age can become dehydrated very quickly. Look out for the danger signs of dry mouth, tongue and lips, reduced skin elasticity, sunken eyes and cheeks, weakness or little urination. Children this young need to see a doctor if vomiting continues for longer than three hours or diarrhea for twenty four hours.

The best treatment for gastro symptoms is drinking plenty of fluids such as oral rehydration solutions. These are specially-prepared products that contain the right amounts of electrolytes, glucose and water to replace lost nutrients. These include Gastrolyte and are available from your pharmacy. Medicines such as Imodium are available to stop diarrhea but as diarrhoea is the body's way of getting rid of an infection, they should be used with caution. Ask your pharmacist what is the best treatment for you.

Here are some simple food handling and cooking tips, and general hygiene measures, to help prevent getting a gastro bug this summer. Wash hands in hot soapy water and dry them well after going to the toilet, after changing babies' nappies and before touching food and preparing meals. Use clean utensils and chopping boards. Defrost meats thoroughly in the fridge rather than on the bench and cook meats until the juices run clear and the flesh is no longer pink. Keep raw foods in the fridge separated from cooked and ready-to-eat foods and refrigerate all foods until ready to use. Use chilly bins with frozen pads inside to keep food cool at the picnic, cover all food and leave cooked food to cool no longer than 30 minutes before putting in the refrigerator. Reheat leftovers until they are steaming hot and only reheat once.

For more information on preventing and treating gastro, ask for a Self Care card at your pharmacy or visit www.nzfsa.govt.nz and www.foodsafe.org.nz for additional food safety and handling advice.