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Rotavirus Fact Sheet: Understanding Rotavirus

What is rotavirus?

Rotavirus is an extremely common and highly contagious stomach virus, and it can be serious.

What are the symptoms of rotavirus infection?

A case of rotavirus may include fever, vomiting, upset stomach, and watery diarrhea that can last from 3 to 9 days. In a severe case, a child may experience more than 20 episodes of diarrhea or vomiting in a day. Because babies are so small, these symptoms can quickly lead to a loss of body fluids called dehydration.

Is rotavirus infection serious?

Rotavirus can be serious because of the dehydration it can cause. If your baby has a severe case and becomes dehydrated, it can be life threatening. Your doctor can't predict which babies will have serious cases of rotavirus. Every year in the United States, rotavirus sends approximately 250,000 children under age 5 to the emergency room and up to 70,000 to the hospital.

Is my child at risk of being infected with rotavirus?

Rotavirus is very easy to catch. It can survive on surfaces for a long time. The virus is easily spread through contaminated hands or objects. Babies are at particular risk from rotavirus, with most severe cases occurring between 6 months and 2 years of age. Nearly all children in the United States are infected by the time they're 5 years old.

If rotavirus is so common, why haven't I heard of it?

You may not have heard the term "rotavirus," but you are probably very familiar with the diarrhea, vomiting, fever, and upset stomach it can cause. When a child has these symptoms, the doctor may not test to find out the cause because it usually won't change the treatment.

What can I do about rotavirus?

One of the best things you can do for your baby is to get the information you need early. If your baby gets a rotavirus infection, it is important to try to prevent dehydration. While illness may be mild in many cases, in severe cases a child may need to go to the hospital or emergency room for treatment.

Call your doctor if your child shows signs of rotavirus infection.