

Norovirus

Information Sheet

What is it?

Norovirus infection (often called stomach flu or viral gastroenteritis or non-bacterial gastroenteritis) is caused by a group of viruses that are commonly found in the gut of people. Viruses are very different than bacteria and parasites, some of which can cause a similar illness to *Norovirus* infection. Viruses are much smaller, are not affected by treatment with antibiotics and cannot grow outside the human body.

Norovirus infection is not a specific notifiable disease under the Health Act 1956 however it may be notified to the public health service when there is an acute gastroenteritis outbreak affecting a group of people or where the case is involved in a high-risk occupation (e.g. food handler, childcare/health worker, etc) or lives in a residential institution.

How does a person become infected?

Norovirus is found in high numbers in the vomit and faeces (stool, poo, tūtae) of people infected with the virus. Others become infected when they swallow the virus. This may be from:

- Eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated with *Norovirus* from an infected food handler.
- Touching surfaces or objects contaminated with *Norovirus*, e.g. taps, utensils, linen, and then placing their hand into their mouth or sucking or mouthing contaminated objects.
- Having direct contact with another person who is infected and showing symptoms (for example, caring for someone with the illness, contact with faeces or vomit of an infected person or sharing food or eating utensils with someone who is ill).

This virus is extremely infectious and can spread rapidly in a household or institutional setting, e.g. in hospitals, schools, childcare centres and rest homes.

What are the signs and symptoms of the illness?

Symptoms of *Norovirus* illness usually begin about 24 to 48 hours after contact with the virus. The symptoms usually include nausea (feeling sick), vomiting, diarrhoea and stomach cramps. Sometimes people also suffer from low grade fever, chills, headache, muscle aches and a general sense of tiredness. The onset is often sudden and the infected person may feel very unwell. In general, children experience more vomiting than adults.

The illness is usually brief, with symptoms lasting around 24 – 48 hours. Some people may feel unwell for longer.

Diagnosis can only be confirmed by a faecal (stool, poo, tūtae) or vomit test arranged by your doctor or Health Protection Officer at your local Public Health Unit.

How bad is it?

Norovirus infection is usually not serious and no long-term health effects have been known. However, sometimes people are unable to drink enough fluids to replace those lost from vomiting and diarrhoea. These people can become dehydrated and may require special medical attention. It is vital that people ill with *Norovirus* drink plenty of fluids. This is especially important for children, the elderly or those suffering from weakened immune systems. If the diarrhoea and/or vomiting is severe or your illness does not improve, see your doctor.

Antibiotics are not effective against *Norovirus*.

People infected with *Norovirus* are infectious from the moment they are infected (and before they feel unwell) to at least three days after recovery. Some people may remain infectious for up to two weeks after recovery.

There are many different strains of *Norovirus* which makes it difficult for a person's body to develop long-lasting immunity. This means that you can have more than one bout of *Norovirus* in your lifetime. Because of differences in genetic factors, some people are more likely to become infected and develop a more severe illness than others.

Will I need time off school, childcare or work?

Your doctor, nurse or health protection officer can provide advice on this. Usually you can go back to work, school, etc., if you have been free of symptoms for at least 48 hours (2 days). If you are involved in a high-risk occupation, the following rules apply:

- People who work in the food industry **must not** attend work while symptomatic and for at least two days after they recover from their illness.
- Early childhood centre workers and healthcare workers in high risk areas **must not** attend work while symptomatic and for at least two days after they recover from their illness.

As you may be infectious for some days after recovery, good personal hygiene is important to prevent spreading the disease around. Good handwashing and hand drying after toileting is vital as well as taking extra care when cleaning up faecal or vomit matter or items contaminated with these materials.

How do I avoid the illness?

You can decrease your chance of contracting or spreading the illness by:

- Always washing and drying your hands thoroughly:
 - After going to the toilet
 - Before and after preparing food
 - After changing children's nappies or after cleaning up faecal or vomit 'accidents'
 - After nursing a patient with diarrhoea and vomiting symptoms
- Thoroughly cleaning and disinfecting surfaces that have been contaminated with faeces or vomit using a bleach-based household cleaner (following the manufacturers instructions). Wear gloves when cleaning up. Many common (non-chlorine) disinfectants do not kill *Norovirus*.
- Flushing any faeces or vomit away in the toilet (with the toilet lid down) and make sure the surrounding area is kept clean.
- Immediately removing and washing contaminated clothing and linen, using hot water and laundry detergent.
- Avoiding food preparation if you are unwell for at least 2 days after the symptoms have gone.
- Avoiding swimming for at least 2 weeks after recovery.

For further information please contact:



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