

Rotavirus

Information Sheet

What is it?

Rotavirus is a common virus that causes a mild to severe diarrhoea in humans. Infants and young children in childcare centres and children's hospitals are most often infected. The virus can also be a cause of diarrhoea in the elderly living in long-term care facilities and homes for older adults. Sometimes, the virus can cause *traveller's diarrhoea* in healthy adults.

Rotavirus 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?

This virus is spread in faeces. An infected person can transfer the virus to people, surfaces, or objects by touching them if they did not wash their hands very well after they used the toilet. If another person touches the same surface or the infected person's hand and then touches their mouth, the virus could enter their body and they would be infected.

Rotavirus can also be found in a person's throat and lungs; and could spread through a cough or a sneeze. The virus can be spread to others before and after symptoms appear.

Susceptibility is greatest between 6 and 24 months of age. Usually by three years of age most people have immunity to this virus.

What are the signs and symptoms of the illness?

Symptoms appear about 1 to 2 days after infection. Symptoms include vomiting, watery diarrhoea, and fever, which usually last 4 to 6 days. The virus can be spread to others before and after symptoms appear. The illness passes after a few days.

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?

Severe diarrhoea and/or vomiting in children can lead to dehydration. Dehydration signs include:

- Thirst
- Restlessness
- Dry mouth and tongue
- Dry skin
- Irritability
- Urinating less frequently
- Fatigue or laziness
- Dry nappy for several hours

Drinking enough water or other fluids is very important to avoid dehydration.

Will I need time off school, childcare or work?

Your Health Protection Officer or Public Health Nurse can give you advice on this. Generally you should not handle food, return to work or childcare, or care for others until you are symptom free for at least 48 hours. 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 hand washing 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:

- Receiving the rotavirus vaccine (routinely provided at 6 weeks + 3 months of age)
- 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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