

Norovirus - Your questions answered

An information guide



Norovirus – Your questions answered

What is norovirus?

Often referred to as 'winter vomiting bug' or 'stomach flu', norovirus is the official name for a group of viruses that cause gastroenteritis (diarrhoea and vomiting) they are the most common cause of stomach bugs in the UK.

It is usually a mild virus which is typically seen during the winter months, but can occur anytime throughout the year. Since large numbers of patients and staff may be involved, outbreaks of norovirus can be a major disruption to healthcare service provision.

Outbreaks of the virus are common in the UK, both in hospitals and the community. It is estimated that between 600,000 and a million people are affected each year, approximately 3,000 of those infected will be admitted to hospital.

What are the symptoms?

Norovirus symptoms include:

- Nausea
- Vomiting and/or diarrhoea with abdominal cramps
- A higher than normal temperature
- headaches and muscle aches.

Symptoms often begin suddenly; usually 24 to 48 hours after ingestion of the virus but can be experienced within 12 hours of exposure. Symptoms usually last for 24 to 48 hours but can go on for a little longer.

How serious is norovirus?

Although unpleasant, the symptoms are usually quite mild and self-limiting with no long-term health effects. However, some people may become dehydrated due to the amount of fluid they have lost, and may require some fluid replacement.

Severe dehydration is usually only seen in the very young, the elderly, or those with immune systems which are not functioning well. Even in these individuals, a full recovery is normal. Dehydration can be prevented by drinking plenty of fluids.

If your symptoms haven't improved after three days of sickness, or if you experience sudden worsening of symptoms or pain, or suspect you, or someone you are caring for is severely dehydrated and you need some advice, ring the NHS non-emergency number 111. In medical emergencies always dial 999.

How does it spread?

Norovirus is found in the faeces and vomit of infected people. Therefore when people vomit or have diarrhoea the virus may be sprayed into the environment and land on surfaces and equipment.

It can also be passed on by physical contact. It is a highly infectious virus, and therefore spreads quickly. The virus cannot be seen with the naked eye and people can become infected in the following ways:

- Eating or drinking foodstuffs that are contaminated with norovirus.
- Touching contaminated surfaces and then putting their hands to their mouth.
- Having direct contact with an infected person who is showing symptoms.

Noroviruses can survive on practically any surface including door handles, sinks, table tops and glassware. On hard surfaces in the environment, they have been found to survive for up to 12 hours; noroviruses have been found to survive for up to 12 days on contaminated carpet.

Who gets norovirus?

Norovirus can affect anyone and at any age. There are many different strains and therefore having had norovirus infection once does not prevent you getting a further infection at a later date.

Depending on individual factors, the degree of severity varies from person to person.

Noroviruses are easily spread in environments where people are in close contact, and outbreaks often occur in group settings such as schools, hospitals, child care facilities and nursing homes.

What is the treatment for norovirus?

There is no available treatment for norovirus apart from letting it run its course and to replenish lost fluids to prevent dehydration; it cannot be treated with antibiotics because antibiotics fight bacteria, not viruses.

How can the spread of norovirus be prevented?

In hospital, infected patients will be nursed in single side rooms or nursed together in bays. This is to help prevent the spread of the virus to unaffected areas and other susceptible patients. Visiting restrictions may be put in place to reduce the risk of spread to relatives and friends.

All patients, staff and visitors are encouraged to wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water; alcohol hand gels are usually ineffective against noroviruses. Protective clothing such as gloves and aprons must be worn by staff for direct patient contact. Visitors will not be expected to wear gloves and aprons unless assisting a patient with personal care.

Disinfection of contaminated areas, especially medical equipment, toilets, including handles and taps, commodes, horizontal surfaces and door handles, must be intensified.

Food, such as fruit, sweets and biscuits should not be left open and exposed as it could potentially become contaminated and spread infection if consumed. Fruit should be washed/peeled before eating.

Good hand and environmental hygiene is important at all times to avoid norovirus in the community. If you or someone you live with has diarrhoea:

- After each use, ensure toilets are cleaned properly with a bleach solution.
- Thoroughly clean hands with soap and water after using the toilet or disposing of body fluid, and also before eating, drinking or preparing food.
- Wash contaminated bed linen and clothing in a domestic washing machine on the hottest temperature the fabric can withstand.
- If you cannot avoid preparing food when symptomatic or for the 48 hours after symptoms have stopped, wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water first.
- Do not attend work/school until you have been symptom free for 48 hours to prevent the spread of norovirus.

Anyone coming into the hospital as a visitor or patient who has had symptoms of diarrhoea and/or vomiting in the past 48 hours, or who has been in close contact with someone with these symptoms, should contact the hospital and seek advice before arriving.

NHS Choices norovirus public information

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Norovirus/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

Public Health England 2012 Norovirus: managing outbreaks in acute and community health and social care settings <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/norovirus-managing-outbreaks-in-acute-and-community-health-and-social-care-settings>

Stop norovirus spreading this winter: leaflet

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/stop-norovirus-spreading-this-winter-leaflet>

If English is not your first language and you need help, please contact the Interpretation and Translation Service

Jeśli angielski nie jest twoim pierwszym językiem i potrzebujesz pomocy, skontaktuj się z działem tłumaczeń ustnych i pisemnych

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For general enquiries please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 0161 604 5897

For enquiries regarding clinic appointments, clinical care and treatment please contact 0161 624 0420 and the Switchboard Operator will put you through to the correct department / service

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