

Norovirus – “Winter Vomiting Flu”

Advice for parents

What are noroviruses?

Noroviruses are a group of viruses that cause “stomach flu,” or vomiting and/or diarrhoea in people. Like all viral infections, noroviruses are not affected by treatment with antibiotics, and cannot grow outside of a person’s body. The amount of norovirus needed to become unwell with vomiting and diarrhoea is extremely small, making it very easy to transmit illness from person to person.

Symptoms

The symptoms are nausea, vomiting, which is often sudden and “projectile”, diarrhoea and sometimes both. Some people may have a raised temperature, chills, stomach cramps, headaches and aching limbs. The illness often begins suddenly, and the infected person may feel very sick. Norovirus affects people of all ages. In general, children experience more vomiting than adults.

When do symptoms appear?

Symptoms of norovirus illness usually begin about 24 to 48 hours after contact with the virus, but they can appear as early as 12 hours after exposure.

Are noroviruses contagious?

Noroviruses are very contagious and can spread easily from person to person. Both stool and vomit are infectious. Particular care should be taken with young children in nappies who have diarrhoea.

How do people become infected with noroviruses?

Noroviruses are found in the stool or vomit of infected people. Anyone can become infected with these viruses. There are many different strains of norovirus, which makes it difficult for a person’s body to develop long-lasting immunity. Therefore, norovirus illness can recur throughout a person’s lifetime.

People can become infected with the virus in several ways:

- eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated with norovirus
- touching surfaces or objects contaminated with norovirus (e.g. toilets, taps, flush handles, door handles, furniture) and then placing their hand in their mouth
- having direct contact with another person who is infected and showing symptoms (for example, when caring for someone with illness, or sharing foods or eating utensils with someone who is ill)

How long will my child be contagious for?

48 hours after symptoms have gone away.

How serious is norovirus?

People may feel very sick and vomit many times a day, but most people get better within 1 or 2 days, and they have no long-term health effects related to their illness.

How long does my child need to be away from school?

Children who have been infected should not go to school for 48 hours after their symptoms have gone away.

What treatment is available for people with norovirus infection?

Norovirus infection cannot be treated with antibiotics. This is because antibiotics work to fight bacteria and not viruses. There is no specific treatment for norovirus apart from letting the illness run its course. It is important to offer plenty of drinks (water, dilute fruit juice) to your child to prevent dehydration.

Can norovirus infections be prevented?

You can decrease your chance of coming in contact with noroviruses by following these preventive steps:

- Frequently wash your hands, especially after toilet visits and changing nappies and before eating or preparing food
- Carefully wash fruits and vegetables
- Thoroughly clean contaminated surfaces immediately after an episode of illness, with hot soapy water, remembering that vomiting sprays infectious particles too small to seen by the naked eye over a wide area
- Immediately remove and wash clothing or linens that may be contaminated with virus after an episode of illness (use hot water and soap)
- Flush or discard any vomit and/or stool in the toilet and make sure that the surrounding area is kept clean
- Should you (parent/carer) become unwell with diarrhoea and/or vomiting, you should not prepare food while you have symptoms and for 48 hours after you recover from illness. Food that may have been contaminated by an ill person should be disposed of.