

Norwalk Virus Information Sheet

What is Norwalk Virus?

Norwalk virus is a very common source of non-bacterial diarrhea and vomiting in humans. There are several different viruses that make up the Norwalk and Norwalk-like viruses. They are very small and often difficult to detect.

Norwalk viruses are often associated with outbreaks in nursing homes, homes for the aged and other adult institutions due to the close proximity of the residents. Outbreaks have also been linked to banquets, cruise ships, swimming pools, schools and restaurants. The illness can occur year round, but is more common in the fall and winter.

What are the symptoms?

The usual symptoms are sudden onset of watery diarrhea, vomiting, cramps, headache, fever, chills and sore throat. These symptoms usually appear 24 to 48 hours after having contact with the virus. The illness commonly lasts 24 to 48 hours. Immunity against the virus can last up to 14 weeks.

How is the Norwalk Virus spread?

The Norwalk virus infects humans only, and spreads through exposure to infected people or contaminated food or water. The virus is passed in stool and in vomit. Outbreaks have been linked to sick food handlers, contaminated shellfish, or water contaminated with sewage. Direct contact or airborne transmission during vomiting has been suggested to explain the rapid spread in institutions. The virus is very contagious and only a few viruses are needed to cause illness.

How do you prevent Norwalk infections?

Thorough hand washing is the best prevention.

1. Wash hands thoroughly after using the toilet, handling diapers or before preparing food.
2. In long-term care facilities, encourage visitors to wash their hands before and after visiting.
3. Isolate people ill with diarrhea and Norwalk like symptoms from others.
4. In institutions, isolate ill residents from group activities until they are symptom-free for 48 hours. Ill staff should remain off work until symptom-free for 48 hours.
5. Dispose of feces and fecally contaminated material carefully.
6. Clean and sanitize washrooms and all hand contact surfaces once daily or as needed.
7. Avoid drinking untreated water.
8. Cook shellfish thoroughly before eating.

What is the treatment?

There is no specific treatment available. Drink liquids frequently to avoid becoming dehydrated.

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