

Norovirus Infection

What is Norovirus?

Norovirus is a highly contagious virus that causes gastroenteritis (inflammation of the stomach and intestines). Even small amounts of the virus can spread infection. This can lead to vomiting, diarrhea, and nausea.

Norovirus, often referred to as the “stomach flu”, is the most common cause of gastroenteritis outbreaks worldwide. Many outbreaks have been traced back to food that was handled by an infected person. Outbreaks have also been linked to banquets, swimming pools, schools and restaurants.

The illness can occur year round, but is more common in the fall and winter.

What are the symptoms of Norovirus?

- Vomiting
- Sudden onset of watery diarrhea
- Nausea
- Cramps
- Headache
- Fever
- Muscle aches
- Fatigue

These symptoms may occur as soon as 10 hours after exposure to the virus, but may take up to 48 hours. The illness commonly lasts 24 to 48 hours and is usually not severe.

How does Norovirus spread?

Norovirus is **highly contagious**. The main source of the virus is stool and vomit from infected people. The virus spreads through the fecal-oral route. People can become infected with the virus in several ways:

- Direct contact (e.g. shaking hands) with a person who is infected
- Touching surfaces and objects contaminated with the virus (e.g. door knob) then touching your mouth
- Eating and drinking food that are contaminated with the virus

Those infected with norovirus are most contagious when they are sick. Afterwards they can continue to spread the virus for up to three weeks after symptoms stops.

Norovirus outbreaks are common worldwide. Outbreaks frequently have their source in restaurants, schools, day care centres, cruise ships, hotels and long-term care/retirement homes.

How is Norovirus treated?

There is no specific treatment for norovirus. Persons who are severely dehydrated may need rehydration therapy.

How can Norovirus be prevented?

To lower the spread of norovirus within our communities:

- Anyone experiencing symptoms should continue to stay home for at least 48 hours after symptoms stop
- Thoroughly wash hands with soap and water, especially after using the toilet or changing diapers and before preparing, handling and eating food
- Wear gloves when cleaning up vomit or diarrhea. Contaminated surfaces must first be scrubbed using detergent and water and then disinfected. To disinfect a contaminated surface, create a chlorine bleach solution by mixing one cup (250 ml) of bleach in nine cups (2.25L) of water
- Remove and wash clothes and linens that may be contaminated with vomit or feces
- Keep sick individuals out of areas where food is being handled or prepared
- Anyone who is sick should not handle or prepare food for at least 48 hours after symptoms stop

Other measures include:

- Carefully disposing or washing material contaminated with stool or vomit (e.g. soiled diapers or clothing)
- Cleaning and sanitizing washrooms and all hand contact surfaces daily or as needed
- Avoid drinking untreated water
- Carefully washing fruits and vegetables with clean water
- Cooking shellfish thoroughly before eating

Source: Heymann, DL, editor. Control of Communicable Diseases Manual. 20th edition. Washington: Alpha Press; 2015.

