

NOROVIRUS – the “Stomach Bug”

Noroviruses are a group of related viruses. Infection with any of these viruses causes an illness called gastroenteritis (*GAS-tro-en-ter-i-tis*), causing inflammation of the stomach and intestines.

Norovirus is VERY contagious.

It spreads quickly and easily.



Norovirus is the most common cause of gastroenteritis in the United States. The CDC estimates that each year more than 20 million cases of acute gastroenteritis are caused by norovirus – that’s about 1 in every 15 Americans. Each year, norovirus is responsible for over 70,000 hospitalizations and 800 deaths in the U.S.

Norovirus illness is often called "food poisoning" or a "stomach flu". While it is true that food poisoning *can* be caused by a norovirus, other bacteria, viruses, parasites and chemicals can also cause food poisoning. Norovirus illness is **not related** to the flu (influenza), which is a respiratory illness caused by the influenza virus.

Anyone can be infected with norovirus, and you can be infected more than once during your life.

Norovirus illness is usually not serious. Symptoms of norovirus infection include diarrhea, nausea, vomiting and stomach cramping, which can be severe. Other less common symptoms include low grade fever, chills, headache, muscle aches and a general sense of fatigue.

Most people get better in 1 to 2 days. Norovirus illness can be serious in young children, the elderly and people with chronic health conditions. It can lead to severe dehydration, hospitalization and even death.

NOROVIRUS SPREADS QUICKLY

Healthy people who eat contaminated food or touch a contaminated surface (and then touch their eyes, nose or mouth) may become ill. An **outbreak** occurs when enough people get sick at the same time.

Outbreaks of norovirus have occurred in crowded, closed facilities or places where people consume water and/or food prepared or handled by others. They happen in nursing homes, hospitals, restaurants, cruise ships, schools, day care centers, summer camps, banquet halls and family dinners. In many of these cases, sick food handlers (people who cook or prepare food for others) were involved in the spread of the virus.

Norovirus is a leading cause of illness from contaminated foods. Leafy greens, fresh fruits, and shellfish (such as oysters) are foods that are most commonly involved in foodborne outbreaks. However, any food item that is served raw or handled after being cooked can become contaminated with norovirus.

Norovirus is found in the vomit and stool of infected people. You can be infected by:

- Eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated with norovirus by someone who has trace amounts of stool or vomit on their hands, and then touches the food or drink.
- Touching surfaces or objects contaminated with norovirus and then putting your hand or fingers in your mouth.
- Having direct contact with a person who is infected with norovirus (for example, when caring for someone with norovirus or sharing foods or eating utensils with them).

There is no vaccine to prevent norovirus infection and no drug to treat it.
Do not take antibiotics to treat norovirus illness - antibiotics are effective only against bacteria, not viruses.

HOW IS NOROVIRUS TREATED?

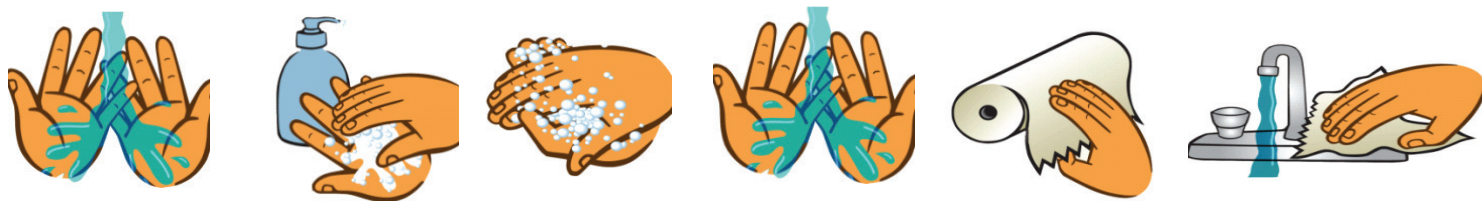
The most important treatment is preventing dehydration (severe loss of fluids). Dehydration can occur when you are not able to drink enough liquids to replace the fluids lost from persistent vomiting or having diarrhea. Symptoms include a decrease in urination, dry mouth and throat and feeling dizzy when standing up. Children who are dehydrated may also cry with few or no tears and be unusually sleepy or fussy.

Treatment should begin at home. Your physician may give you specific instructions about what kinds of fluid to give. CDC recommends that families with infants and young children keep a supply of oral rehydration solution (ORS) at home at all times and use the solution when diarrhea first occurs in the child. ORS is available without a prescription.

The best way to prevent dehydration is to drink plenty of liquids. Oral rehydration fluids are the most helpful for severe dehydration. Other liquids without caffeine or alcohol can help with mild dehydration, such as water, broth, herb tea, diluted fruit juice or a sports drink like *Gatorade*.

YOU CAN HELP PREVENT NOROVIRUS FROM SPREADING:

- **STAY HOME FROM WORK WHILE YOU ARE SICK.** Do not prepare food while you are sick with diarrhea, vomiting, nausea and/or stomach cramping. The Health Department recommends that anyone who has been sick does not work as a food handler for 3 days after their symptoms end. Handwashing is a key part of infection control since someone who has been sick can shed the norovirus (make other people sick) for a period of time after they feel better.
- **TAKE CARE IN THE KITCHEN.** Food items that might have been contaminated with norovirus should be thrown out. Carefully wash fruits and vegetables. Do not eat shellfish that may have come from contaminated water. Always cook oysters and other shellfish thoroughly before eating.
- **HANDWASHING IS IMPORTANT TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF NOROVIRUS.** Wash your hands carefully with soap and water, especially after using the toilet and before preparing or handling food. Infected people can spread norovirus from the day they start to feel sick **and** for as long as 2 to 3 weeks after they feel better. Alcohol based hand sanitizers may be a helpful addition to hand washing, but they are not a substitute for washing with soap and water.



- **CLEAN AND DISINFECT ALL CONTAMINATED SURFACES.** Use a chlorine bleach solution with a concentration of 1–1½ cups of household bleach (like *Clorox*) per gallon of water. Prepare fresh bleach solution every day since it will lose its effectiveness overnight. You can also use a disinfectant registered as effective against norovirus by the EPA – a list can be found at www.epa.gov/oppad001/list_g_norovirus.pdf.
- **WASH LAUNDRY THOROUGHLY.** Clothes, diapers and linens (bed sheets, pillow cases and towels) that are soiled with any vomit or stool should be handled carefully to avoid spreading virus. Wash all items with detergent at the longest available washing machine cycle and machine dry on high heat.



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