

Norovirus Factsheet

Infection Prevention and Control | Helping keep you and your customers protected from catching preventable illnesses

What Is It?

Norovirus is a group of very similar viruses; also known as Norwalk-type virus, winter vomiting bug, viral gastroenteritis, Hawaii virus, Snow Mountain virus, Mexico virus, Desert Shield virus, Southampton virus, Lordsdale virus – the list goes on.

It is the biggest cause of viral gastroenteritis world-wide with 250-300 million infections per year.

How Serious Is It?

Some strains are nastier than others and it does kill ~250,000 people annually – but this is in developing countries and predominantly the very young and very old.

Here, apart from the risk of dehydration, norovirus isn't usually dangerous and there are no long-lasting effects from having the illness. However, it is pretty unpleasant while you have it.

Symptoms

Symptoms can begin as early as 12 hours or as many as 48 hours after exposure and usually include vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal pain, stomach ache, headaches, low fever and tiredness.

Symptoms can last from 12 to 60 hours, but most people recover within two to three days. **It is a prolific and contagious illness.** The virus also mutates very quickly so the body does not build up immunity to it – this is one of the reasons it is possible to have more than one incident in a 'season'.

Dehydration

The main risk from norovirus is dehydration - your body losing water and salts from the vomiting and diarrhoea. Thirst is the first sign of dehydration but other symptoms include dizziness, headache, fatigue, tiredness and dark, concentrated urine – and only passing small amounts of urine less than 3-4 times a day. Mild dehydration is common and can easily be reversed by making sure you have plenty to drink. The young and old are more at risk of becoming dehydrated so it's very important that you seek medical attention immediately if you think a child or elderly relative is becoming dehydrated.

Treatment

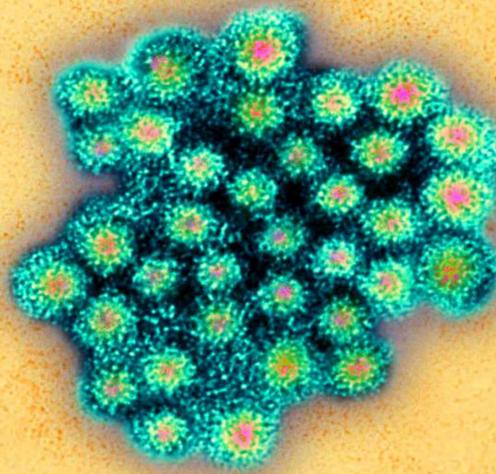
There is no real treatment for the illness apart from letting it run its course. There's no need to visit your physician because your body can usually fight off the infection within a couple of days. But it's very important that you drink plenty of fluid even if you don't feel like it.

Eat foods that are easy to digest, such as soup, rice, pasta and bread.

What It Looks Like

This is a group of Norovirus particles magnified a million times.

Each virus particle is so small that it's 10-20 times smaller than the wavelength of visible light.



Despite its small size it is resistant to most chemicals and it takes fewer than 10 virus particles to make you sick. People with norovirus shed 100 billion virus particles in every gram of faeces.

How Norovirus Spreads

Norovirus is **mainly** transmitted via the faeco-oral ("turd to tongue") route but also via touching vomit from an infected person.

You can also breathe in virus particles if they become aerosolised when someone with norovirus throws up.

Why Is Norovirus So Contagious?

The virus particles are tiny, it only takes between 1 and 10 particles to infect you and most chemicals don't kill it – **it's all about hand washing.**

Norovirus has been shown to survive on surfaces for up to 28 days and a person with Norovirus can shed 100 *billion* virus particles per *gram* of faeces.

Let's just think about that:

- 1 A gram of poop contains 100 billion virus particles - a £10 note also weighs a gram
- 1 Cut the £10 bill into a million pieces
- 1 Take *one* of those pieces and cut it into 10,000 more...

Just one of those pieces is the size of the smear of faecal matter needed to pass on the virus.



What You Must Do

Let's recap:

- 1 A microscopic speck of faecal matter left on hands after using the lavatory will spread the virus – it can be spread by contact with infected vomit but the faeco-oral route is the most common;
- 1 It's not killed by soaps, gels or foams
- 1 While the advice is you're safe to return to work after 48 hours, you can remain 'stool positive' – still shedding virus – for up to two months after being ill – this is why it keeps coming back.

What this all means is *hand washing is vital.*

We all know the importance of scrupulous hand hygiene and while soaps don't kill the noroviruses they are easily washed off if you wash your hands properly.

Scrupulous hand washing protects us all:

- 1 It protects you
- 1 It protects your colleagues
- 1 It protects visitors
- 1 It protects our reputation.

We ALL need to adopt a 'zero tolerance' attitude to poor hand washing - so let's all lead by example.

And if a colleague tries to leave the lavatory without washing their hands properly **call them on it.** It protects us all.

If We Don't Take This Seriously...

Norovirus isn't the only bug spread by poor hand hygiene – many other foodborne and healthcare-associated illnesses are too.

But Norovirus is incredibly contagious and infects people indiscriminately.

Hand hygiene – and especially hand washing – is in all of our interests.

**And once it gets into a school, restaurant, care home, ship...
...it's very difficult to get rid of.**

