

Norovirus Illness

What is norovirus?

Norovirus is a very common virus that causes diarrhea and vomiting in humans and is often called stomach flu but is not related to the flu (influenza). Norovirus is commonly responsible for outbreaks in places where people are in close proximity to each other such as long-term care and retirement homes, childcare centers, schools and cruise ships. Norovirus can survive for weeks on surfaces if not properly cleaned and disinfected.

How norovirus is spread?

Norovirus is very contagious and found in the stool and sometimes in the vomit of a person sick with the virus. People can become infected with the virus in several ways including:

- Having direct contact with an infected person.
- Eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated with the virus.
- Eating food such as raw shellfish harvested from contaminated waters (e.g. oysters and clams).
- Touching surfaces or objects contaminated with the virus (e.g. doorknob or stair railings) and then touching your mouth or eyes.
- Tiny drops of vomit from a person with norovirus spray through the air, landing on surfaces or entering another person's mouth. This has been suggested to explain its rapid spread in settings like schools and child care centres.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually appear one to two days after you have been exposed to the virus. Symptoms usually happen quickly and include watery non-bloody diarrhea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, and nausea. A low-grade fever may occur and dehydration is possible. The symptoms usually last one to two days; however, the virus can still be spread for up to two days after the symptoms stop.

Immunity against the virus is unclear and short. For some, immunity may last up to 14 weeks. The incidence of illness does occur year round, however it is more common during the fall and winter months.

How to prevent norovirus infections?

Norovirus can stay on objects and surfaces and still infect people for days to weeks. Fortunately, there are many simple interventions that can decrease the spread of these illnesses including:

- The best prevention is thorough hand washing for at least 15 seconds, making sure hands are properly washed after using the toilet, changing diapers, and before preparing or eating food.
- Anyone who is ill with diarrhea or vomiting staying home until well for at least 48 hours after symptoms stop.
- Not preparing food and caring for others when you are sick with norovirus or any other gastrointestinal illness.
- Using safe food-handling techniques (e.g., washing fruits and vegetables and cooking shellfish thoroughly).
- Thoroughly and frequently cleaning and disinfecting contaminated surfaces and equipment with a chlorine bleach disinfectant (e.g., 1 part household bleach to 9 parts water), or other Health Canada approved disinfectants that claim to be effective against norovirus.
- Immediately removing and washing clothes or linens that may be contaminated. Always handlig soiled items without agiting them and washing your hands after handling potentially contaminated laundry.