

What is Norovirus infection?

Norovirus is a highly contagious virus which causes gastroenteritis. It is the most common cause of acute gastroenteritis, characteristically causing sudden onset of severe vomiting and diarrhoea. There are many types of norovirus and you can get it more than once. It occurs in all age-groups and may be the cause of outbreaks on cruise ships and in schools, hospitals and nursing homes.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms typically begin after an incubation period of 12-48 hours and include:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Abdominal (stomach) pain or cramps
- Watery or loose diarrhoea
- Malaise/fatigue
- Low-grade fever
- Muscle aches

Up to a third of people with norovirus infection may show no signs or symptoms. However, they are still contagious and can spread the virus to others.

How long does it last?

Norovirus symptoms last one to three days and most people recover completely without treatment. However, for some people – especially infants, older adults and people with underlying medical conditions – vomiting and diarrhoea may have a more prolonged course (e.g. 4-6 days), can be severely dehydrating and may require medical attention.

How is infection spread?

The virus is highly contagious. It is estimated that 15 billion infectious doses of virus are found in each gram of stool during peak shedding of the virus and that only 18 virus particles are required for an infectious dose!

Norovirus can spread to others by:

- having direct contact with an infected person
- eating food or drink prepared by infected food handlers
- sharing cups or utensils with infected people
- touching contaminated objects and then putting fingers to mouth (e.g. surfaces contaminated with norovirus particles from vomit or faeces)

How can infection be prevented?

You are infectious from the moment you begin feeling sick until a few days after symptoms have settled since the virus continues to be shed in faeces for 48-72 hours after symptoms have resolved and can be passed on to others. This is particularly important for food handlers and child and healthcare workers who should be excluded from work for this time period. The virus may even remain detectable in faeces for as long as one month after infection, though at low levels.

Appropriate hand hygiene is the most important way to prevent norovirus infection. This includes thorough hand washing for at least 20 seconds with running water and soap (normal or antiseptic). Alcohol-based hand sanitising gels may not be effective. Hands should be thoroughly washed after bathroom visits and before eating or preparing food. Ideally when you are sick you should not prepare food or care for others. Household chlorine bleach solutions can be used to disinfect contaminated surfaces in the home (e.g. bathrooms and high-touch surfaces such as door knobs). Wash any contaminated laundry (vomit or faeces) as soon as possible.