

What is Astrovirus?

Astrovirus is an important cause of viral gastroenteritis particularly in children less than 5 years of age. Occasionally it is the cause of outbreaks in the elderly in hospitals and nursing homes. Adults are likely protected from antibodies acquired in childhood, although infection in healthy adults can sometimes occur.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms typically begin after an incubation period of 1-5 days and include:

- Diarrhoea (usually mild/watery)
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Abdominal (stomach) pain or cramps
- Malaise/fatigue
- Low-grade fever
- Muscle aches

Astrovirus infection is less likely to cause vomiting and dehydration compared to other causes of viral gastroenteritis. Some people with astrovirus infection may show no signs or symptoms.

How long does it last?

Astrovirus symptoms usually last three to four days and most people recover completely without treatment. However, for some people - especially those with compromised immune systems - diarrhoea may have a more prolonged course, can be dehydrating and may require medical attention.

How is infection spread?

Astrovirus 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 astrovirus particles from faeces).

How can infection be prevented?

People with astrovirus infection are potentially infectious from the first moment they begin feeling sick until a few days after symptoms have resolved, since the virus continues to be shed in faeces and can be passed on to others. In fact the virus may continue to be shed for up to a month after infection, although intermittently and at low levels.

Appropriate hand hygiene is the most important way to prevent astrovirus infection. This is done by 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. 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).