

What is Rotavirus?

Rotavirus is an important cause of viral gastroenteritis, particularly in infants and young children. It was the leading cause of gastroenteritis in childhood until the introduction of rotavirus vaccination in 2007¹. Infection can occur in adults and the elderly, particularly in hospitals and aged-care facilities. Rotavirus infections are often more severe than other common causes of diarrhoea, causing dehydrating diarrhoea in some patients. It is seasonally more common in mid to late winter.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms typically begin after an incubation period of 1-3 days and include: watery diarrhoea, nausea, vomiting, abdominal (stomach) pain or cramps, high-grade fever, malaise/fatigue, muscle aches

Many people, especially adults, with rotavirus infection may show no signs or symptoms. However, they are still contagious and can spread the virus to others.

How long does it last?

Rotavirus symptoms last three to seven days and most people recover completely without treatment. However, for some people - especially infants, older adults and people with underlying disease - vomiting and diarrhoea may have a more prolonged course, can be severely dehydrating and may require medical attention.

How is infection spread?

Rotavirus can spread to others by

- having direct contact with an infected person (fecal-oral contact)
- 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 rotavirus particles from vomit or faeces).

How is it diagnosed?

Faecal viral PCR on a submitted stool sample

In infants, shedding of rotavirus vaccine strain cannot be distinguished from true infection. The vaccine strain can be shed for at least a month after each dose and on occasions persist for at least 14 weeks.

How can infection be prevented?

Infected people shed large quantities of virus in their stool beginning 2 days before the onset of diarrhoea and for up to 10 days after the onset of symptoms.

Appropriate hand hygiene is the most important way to prevent rotavirus 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).

Reference: ¹ Information on Australian recommendations for Rotavirus vaccination can be found at <https://immunisationhandbook.health.gov.au/vaccine-preventable-diseases/rotavirus>