

Norovirus

What is it?

Norovirus is a common cause of gastroenteritis. Norovirus is easily spread when people eat food or drink fluids contaminated with the virus.

What are the symptoms?

Nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and diarrhoea usually occur 10 - 50 hours after consumption of the virus. Headache, fever and chills may also occur.

Symptoms usually last from 12 to 72 hours, but some people may be unwell for longer. Symptoms can be mild and sometimes infected people have no symptoms.

How is it treated?

There is no specific treatment to get rid of the virus. Your body will overcome the virus, given time. To assist with recovery, extra fluid and rest are recommended. **Watch for dehydration especially in children and the elderly.**

A doctor should always be consulted if symptoms are severe and they may give further advice or treat specific symptoms.

How is it spread?

People become infected when they swallow the virus. The virus can be found in:

- **The Environment**

- Human sewage and sewage polluted water can contaminate shellfish beds. Irrigation and drinking water can be a source, if they are not treated adequately.
- Direct person to person spread can occur through inhaling airborne particles of virus released during vomiting.
- Norovirus is very hardy and can survive for long periods on any surface touched by contaminated hands. This is particularly so for toilet surfaces, door knobs and tap fittings.

- **Humans**

- When people are ill, they excrete a large amount of norovirus in their vomit and faeces. Food can become contaminated if infected food handlers don't wash their hands well after toileting.
- Proper hand hygiene (thorough washing and drying) is critical as infection can be transmitted from improperly cleaned hands to food, drink or environmental surfaces.

How to Prevent it?

- Be careful when cleaning up after ill people. Vomit or faeces should be cleaned up using first a detergent solution then a solution of household chlorine bleach. If vomiting occurs outside of the toilet, open windows and doors to direct airflow to the exterior of the building.
- Clean hands thoroughly. **Do not use alcohol based hand-sanitising gel or wipes as these do not completely inactivate norovirus.**
- Clean hands are hands that are washed with soap and water for 20 seconds and thoroughly dried on a clean dry cloth towel or disposable paper towel for a further 20 seconds. Clean hands after contact with soiled articles, after going to the toilet and before handling food.
- Prevent ill food handlers from preparing food at home and at work until 48 hours after all symptoms cease.

Remember

- Source your shellfish from a reputable supplier.
- Cook food thoroughly - the virus dies when food is steaming hot.
- Avoid contact with infants, the elderly or those with long term illness until you are free of all symptoms.
- Don't handle food until you are free of all symptoms for at least 48 hours.
- Strict hand hygiene is important. Clean hands properly (20 seconds to wash, 20 seconds to dry) after going to the toilet, before handling food and after touching anything that may be contaminated with norovirus.

For further information contact the Auckland Regional Public Health Service on 09 623 4600

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