

Norovirus

Norovirus refers to a group of viruses that cause a stomach or gut infection. Symptoms can include severe vomiting and diarrhoea. Norovirus can be passed very easily from person to person and it is common in New Zealand.

Careful cleaning of surfaces and hand washing is the best way to stop the spread of norovirus. Without proper hygiene measures norovirus can spread easily in places such as day care centres.

How norovirus spreads

When people are ill with norovirus they pass the virus out of their body through their vomit and poo (faeces). If you then eat food, drink water or touch items contaminated with the infected vomit or poo, you can get norovirus too.

You can also be infected from breathing in virus particles in the air which are released after someone with the virus vomits.

Norovirus is very hardy. It can survive for a long time on surfaces and objects touched by someone who has the virus, if they have not properly washed their hands or areas are not cleaned properly.

Shellfish beds and private water sources can also be contaminated by norovirus, especially if they are polluted by human sewage. This is more likely to occur after periods of heavy rain and flooding.

Symptoms

Common symptoms can include:

- feeling or being sick
- stomach pain
- diarrhoea (runny poo)

Some people may have headaches, a fever and chills. Other people may only have a very mild illness, or may not have any symptoms at all.

Symptoms usually appear between 10 hours and three days after being infected.

The illness tends to last between 12 hours and three days. Some people can be ill for much longer.

If you have symptoms

- Contact your doctor, or call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116.
- Your doctor may request a faeces sample for testing.
- This is the only way to confirm if you have the illness.

Treatment and recovery

There is no specific treatment to get rid of norovirus. Your body will overcome the virus, given time.

To ease your recovery you should drink lots of fluid and get plenty of rest. It's important to watch for dehydration, especially in children and the elderly. Dehydration is when your body does not have enough fluids.

Contact your doctor if your symptoms are particularly severe. They may provide further advice on recovery, or recommend treatments to ease your symptoms.

Restrictions

If you have norovirus you are at risk of passing on the virus to others.

You should stay home from work, school or daycare until you have been free of diarrhoea symptoms for at least 48 hours (2 days).

You should also:

- avoid contact with infants, the elderly or those with long term illnesses
- avoid preparing food for others
- clean all surfaces or objects you touch with disinfectant

Practise good handwashing habits

Hand hygiene is essential to preventing the spread of norovirus. Wash hands with soapy water for 20 seconds, then dry well with a clean cloth or paper towel every time:

- after going to the toilet
- before preparing food, eating or drinking
- after changing babies nappies

Make sure children with norovirus or diarrhoea symptoms know to wash their hands properly, and supervise young children.

Alcohol based hand-sanitising gel or wipes are not effective in preventing the spread of norovirus. Handwashing with soap is the best way to kill the virus and stop it spreading.

Prevention

In addition to practicing good hand hygiene, you can reduce the risk to you and others by following simple precautions.

Food and drink

- Cook all food thoroughly to kill any viruses.
- Only drink water that is treated and known to be safe.
- Boil water if you are not sure that it is safe to drink.
- If you have a private water supply from animal and bird poo and treat the water.
- Get your shellfish from a safe, reputable supplier.

Cleaning and outbreaks

- Use household chlorine bleach mixed with water to disinfect surfaces and items that have touched poo or vomit.
- Avoid temporarily visiting places with an outbreak of the virus.

If proper hygiene measures are not followed norovirus outbreaks (where lots of people become infected at the same time) can easily occur in places such as aged care homes and early education centres.

For more information

For more information visit:

www.arphs.nz/norovirus

If you are concerned about norovirus call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116 or contact your doctor or practice nurse.