

## What is norovirus?

Norovirus is a very common viral infection that causes gastroenteritis (inflammation of the stomach and bowel). It is highly contagious and often causes outbreaks, particularly in aged care facilities, child care centres, schools and hospitals. Outbreaks can occur at any time of the year but are more common during winter and into spring.

## What are the symptoms?

Illness caused by norovirus usually starts suddenly and causes vomiting and diarrhoea. Vomiting can be frequent and is more common in children. Other symptoms may include:

- nausea;
- abdominal pain;
- muscle aches;
- headaches;
- tiredness; and/or
- low grade fever.

Symptoms usually begin between 24 to 48 hours after exposure to the virus and generally last for one to three days.

## How is it spread?

Norovirus is highly infectious and is spread from the vomit or faeces of an infected person. People are usually infectious from the start of symptoms until at least two days after the symptoms stop.

Infection can occur from the following:

- close person to person contact, for example shaking hands with someone who has been sick and has the virus on their hands;
- direct contact with the vomit or faeces of an infected person;
- contact with contaminated objects or surfaces;

- consuming contaminated food or drink as a result of poor food handling and hand washing; and/or
- virus particles that remain in the air after a person has vomited.

Occasionally oysters and other shellfish may be directly contaminated with norovirus.

## Who is at risk of infection?

Norovirus can affect anyone. The illness is generally mild but if people are unable to drink enough fluids to replace what they lose through vomiting and diarrhoea, dehydration can become a problem. Infants, young children, the elderly and disabled persons are at greatest risk for this complication.

## How is it diagnosed?

Diagnosis is based on a person's symptoms and testing is not usually required. During outbreaks it may be important to obtain a diagnosis to guide public health responses (and exclude non-viral causes). This involves testing samples of faeces.

## How is it treated?

There is no specific treatment for norovirus gastroenteritis. However it is very important to drink lots of fluids such as plain water or oral rehydration solutions to avoid dehydration. This is especially important for those who are unable to drink enough fluid to replace what they have lost.

## How can norovirus gastroenteritis be prevented?

The most effective way of preventing norovirus gastroenteritis is to practice good hand washing. This is achieved by washing hands thoroughly using soap and running water for at least 10 seconds, followed by drying hands with a clean towel. This should

be done after using the toilet, after changing nappies, after assisting someone with diarrhoea and/or vomiting, after cleaning up body fluid spills and before preparing food. It is particularly important for people who have had gastroenteritis and whose symptoms have resolved to keep their hands clean as people may remain infectious even after they appear to have recovered.

## **Do people need to be excluded from school or work?**

Children in childcare, health care workers (including those working in aged care) and food handlers should not attend child care or work while they continue to experience vomiting and/or diarrhoea. Food handlers should be excluded from work until they have been symptom free for at least 48 hours. In general, any person who has been unwell should avoid visiting aged care facilities and hospitals until at least 48 hours after their symptoms resolve.

## **Outbreaks due to norovirus**

Outbreaks of norovirus gastroenteritis increase during winter and are common in closed settings such as aged care facilities, child care centres and hospitals. Under the *Public Health Act 1997*, outbreaks of two or more cases of vomiting and/or diarrhoea in 24 hours should be notified to the Health Protection Service (HPS). HPS staff will be able to provide advice on controlling the outbreak.

## **Need more information?**

For more information on norovirus gastroenteritis contact your doctor or call the Health Protection Service, Communicable Disease Control Information Line during business hours on **(02) 6205 2155**.

**Communicable Disease Control Section at the Health Protection Service** is responsible for the investigation and surveillance of notifiable or infectious conditions in the ACT in order to control or prevent their spread in the community. This includes the promotion of immunisation, education and other strategies that help to limit the spread of diseases.

## **Acknowledgement**

1. Heymann DL, 2015, *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual*, 20th edition.

## **Accessibility**

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