

Norovirus Fact Sheet

What is Norovirus?

Norovirus is a highly contagious virus that causes acute gastroenteritis (inflammation of the stomach and intestines). Norovirus infection can spread quickly in closed and crowded environments such as hospitals, nursing homes, daycare centers, schools and cruise ships. It is sometimes called “stomach flu” but is not related to influenza (flu) viruses.

How common is norovirus infection?

Norovirus is the most common cause of acute gastroenteritis in the United States. Every year, it causes an estimated 19–21 million cases of acute gastroenteritis. While it is possible to become infected with norovirus year round, norovirus infection happens most often from November to April. You can get it more than once because there are many different strains. There can be a higher incidence of norovirus illnesses in years when there is a new strain of the virus going around.

How do people get norovirus infection?

Norovirus is found in the feces and vomit of infected people and can spread easily from person to person. People can become infected in several ways, including:

- having direct contact with another person who is infected (for example, caring for or sharing foods or eating utensils with someone who is ill)
- eating food or drinking liquids contaminated with norovirus, such as food touched by an ill food handler or undercooked seafood that has been harvested from contaminated waters
- touching contaminated surfaces or objects and then touching their mouth before hand washing

Norovirus is found in the feces even before the person begins to feel ill. A person is contagious from the moment they begin feeling sick until the first few days after they recover from norovirus illness. Some people may be contagious for a longer time since the virus can stay in the feces for 2 weeks or more after recovery.

What are the symptoms of norovirus infection?

Symptoms of norovirus usually begin 12 to 48 hours after the person has been exposed to the virus and last for 1–3 days. The most common symptoms include:

- Vomiting
- Nausea
- Diarrhea
- Stomach cramps

Other symptoms can include a low grade fever, headache, and body aches. People with norovirus can feel extremely ill and vomit or have diarrhea many times a day. This can lead to dehydration, especially in young children, older adults, and people with other illnesses.

How is norovirus infection diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider may suspect norovirus infection based on the combination of symptoms (vomiting and diarrhea) and brief length of the illness. Norovirus infection can be diagnosed by testing the feces. This testing by public health laboratories is important to confirm a norovirus outbreak and to investigate and control the source of infection.

How is norovirus infection treated?

There is no specific treatment for norovirus infection. Drink plenty of fluids to replace fluid lost from throwing up and diarrhea and prevent dehydration. If you become very dehydrated, please see your healthcare provider.

How can you prevent norovirus infection?

Things you can do to reduce the risk of norovirus infection include:

Proper handwashing

- Wash hands frequently with soap and running water for at least 20 seconds, especially after toilet visits, changing diapers, and before preparing or eating food.
- Many currently available hand sanitizers are not effective against norovirus.

Safe food handling

- Carefully wash fruits and vegetables before eating.
- Cook oysters and other shellfish thoroughly. Temperatures above 60°C /140°F will kill the virus.
- Clean and disinfect food preparation equipment and surfaces.
- If you work with food, be sure to wash your hands every time after you use the toilet, even if you don't feel sick. Consider using gloves when handling ready-to-eat foods.

When you are sick with norovirus or any diarrheal illness:

- Do NOT go to school or work, especially if you attend or work in a high-risk setting, such as a hospital, daycare, nursing home, cruise ship, or handle food in your job.
- Do NOT cook, prepare, or serve food for others for at least 2 days after you recover.
- Do NOT provide care for others.
- If you vomit or have diarrhea in a healthcare facility, school, restaurant, hotel, cruise ship or other public toilet, let the management know so they can provide proper cleaning.

Clean and disinfect contaminated surfaces or objects

- Clean and disinfect surfaces contaminated by vomiting or diarrhea with a bleach-based household cleaner. Be sure to read the product label because some disinfectants are not effective against norovirus.
- Wash laundry soiled by vomit or diarrhea right away. Wear disposable gloves, remove items carefully to avoid spreading the virus, and machine wash and dry.

What is the California Department of Public Health doing about norovirus infection?

The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) and local health departments (LHDs) monitor norovirus outbreaks. Although healthcare providers are not required to report individual cases of norovirus to the LHD, outbreaks are reportable. When outbreaks are reported, CDPH and LHDs will investigate to confirm and identify the strain of norovirus, find the cause of the outbreak, prevent further infections, and educate the public.

Where can I get more information on Norovirus?

More information is available on the CDPH Norovirus webpage:

<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/HealthInfo/discond/Pages/Norovirus.aspx> and from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://www.cdc.gov/norovirus/index.html>.

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