

Information for patients

A Guide to Norovirus



Infection Prevention and Control

What is Norovirus?

Norovirus is also known as **Viral gastroenteritis** or the **winter vomiting bug**. It is a frequent cause of diarrhoea and vomiting (D&V) in the community, and the commonest cause of outbreaks of gastroenteritis in hospitals, particularly during the winter months. Outbreaks of the virus are common in the UK, particularly within contained environments, such as hospitals, nursing homes and schools. This is because norovirus spreads very easily from person to person. Norovirus is found in the faeces and vomit of the infected person therefore, when people vomit or have diarrhoea the virus may be spread into the environment and land on surfaces, patient equipment and food.

How does Norovirus spread?

Norovirus spreads very easily. There are billions of virus germs in vomit and diarrhoea. The virus is passed into the mouth and gut through contact with hands, tabletops, exposed food and drink, and in the air. People with a norovirus infection can still spread the virus for several days after they feel completely better.

- Viral gastroenteritis spreads through contact with an infected person.
- consuming food or water contaminated with particles of the virus.
- contact with surfaces or objects contaminated with particles of the virus.
- swallowing the virus in the air after someone has had projectile vomiting.
- consuming raw or undercooked food (particularly shellfish which can be contaminated with raw sewage)
- Outbreaks are when people are confined near each other, such as in schools, hospitals, cruise ships, military bases, and similar settings.

What are the signs and symptoms?

The symptoms of norovirus often begin suddenly and usually within 12 to 48 hours after becoming infected. The main symptoms of norovirus include:

- a sudden onset of nausea
- projectile vomiting
- diarrhoea/watery stool
- a high fever
- stomach cramps
- headache
- aching arms and legs
- Dehydration-thirsty, dizziness, dark coloured urine, and dry mouth, eyes, and lips

Who is at risk of getting infection?

Viral gastroenteritis can affect people of all ages. About 1% of the population is affected each year, usually during the winter. However, Norovirus can occur any time throughout the year. Those most at risk from norovirus are the very young, the elderly and people with impaired immune systems (immunocompromised).

How did I get Norovirus?

Virus particles are spread via the faeces and vomit of an infected individual. You can become infected by touching contaminated surfaces and transferring the virus to your gut by hand to mouth.

Can it be treated?

There is no treatment for Norovirus other than allowing the illness to run its course. You will need to drink fluids frequently to prevent dehydration. Norovirus does not generally cause serious illness and there are usually no long-lasting effects. If you are pregnant, there

is no risk of Norovirus to your unborn child, but it is important to drink fluids frequently to prevent dehydration.

Antibiotics do not work on Norovirus as they kill bacteria, not viruses.

Will I still be admitted to hospital if I am found to have?

Some non-urgent investigations may be delayed if you are experiencing Norovirus until you are 48 hours symptom free (last episode of diarrhoea and vomiting). However, if you are in hospital, investigation and treatment will continue with staff taking the correct infection control precautions.

Will I have to stay in hospital longer because of Norovirus?

Patients who have had Norovirus can be discharged or transferred back to their own home or a nursing/residential home when the symptoms have settled for 48 hours. Relapses are common and can occur in up to 25% of patients. If symptoms reoccur after discharge, then you should contact your GP.

Can I have visitors whilst in hospital?

Unless there are special circumstances, visitors are advised to stay away whilst you have Norovirus because it can spread very easily to them. Visiting and the risks of becoming unwell with Norovirus should be discussed with the Nurse in Charge. Visitors must wash their hands with soap and water as alcohol rub is not effective with Norovirus. If affected, we ask that your visitors and relatives stay away from hospital visiting until free of any symptoms for 48 hours.

When should I wash my hands?

Hand hygiene is the single most important thing you can do to prevent the spread of infection.

You should make regular and thorough hand washing as part of your daily routine, especially:

- Before eating or handling food.
- After using the toilet /commode
- After touching your wound, catheter,
- After blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing
- After touching animals or animal waste
- After handling soiled clothing / rubbish
- After changing a nappy
- Before and after touching a sick or injured person
- Before, during and after a visit to a hospital ward or residential or nursing home

Do not forget to encourage children to wash their hands at these times too. **It is ok to remind healthcare staff to wash their hands.** It may feel like an awkward question to ask when someone is looking after you, but you are entitled to ask if you are concerned.

What happens after I go home?

Do not visit people in hospital or a nursing home and do not prepare food for people if you have diarrhoea or vomiting because you might spread Norovirus. If, for any reason, you must go to an emergency department in a hospital, be sure to tell the staff at reception that you have vomiting and diarrhoea.

How do I know if I still have Norovirus?

You could carry Norovirus for several days after you get better, but the biggest risk of spread is while you have symptoms and for the first two days after you feel better. After you have been well for 48 hours you can go back to normal. For all people always, cleaning hands thoroughly after going to the toilet is a crucial step to prevent the spread of all bacteria and viruses.

How to manage or wash your soiled clothing?

We do not wash patients' personal clothing in hospital. If your own clothing becomes soiled, your clothes will be sealed in a special pink dissolvable bag. This pink bag will then be placed into a white plastic 'patient's property' bag and stored in your locker, ready to be washed at home.

How to wash soiled clothing using a washing machine:

1. Take the pink bag out of the white 'patient's property' bag.
2. Place the pink bag into the washing machine. Do not open the pink bag as it has been specially designed to go straight into the washing machine. Do not add any other items of clothing into the washing machine.
3. You should always wash your hands thoroughly after handling soiled clothing, or the bag of soiled clothing.
4. Use a biological powder, liquid, or tablets if possible.
5. Use a pre-wash cycle before the main wash cycle.
6. Wash the items at the very least 60°C so that the pink bag dissolves and releases the clothing into the washing machine (washing at a lower temperature may not dissolve the bag, which may result in the parts of the bag sticking to the clothing).
7. When the washing cycle is complete, remove the washing from the washing machine and dry the clothing naturally or in a tumble dryer.

Infection prevention and control is everyone's responsibility. Healthcare workers, patients and visitors all have a vital role to play in preventing the spread of healthcare associated infections.

Notes:

If you require a special edition of this leaflet

This leaflet is available in large print. Arrangements can also be made on request for it to be explained in your preferred language. Please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) email: rjah.pals.office@nhs.net

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Tell us what you think of our patient information leaflet.
Please send your comments to the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) email: rjah.pals.office@nhs.net

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