

## INFECTION CONTROL

# NOROVIRUS (Winter Vomiting)

## FOR PATIENTS AND RELATIVES

### What is Norovirus?

Norovirus is a group of viruses that are the most common cause of gastroenteritis (stomach bugs) in England and Wales.

In the past Norovirus has also been called 'winter vomiting virus', 'small round structured virus' or 'Norwalk-like virus'.

### How does it spread?

The virus is easily transmitted from one person to another.

It can be transmitted by contact with an infected person or by contact with contaminated surfaces, objects, food or water.

### What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of Norovirus infection will begin around 12 to 48 hours after becoming infected and will last for 12 to 60 hours.

They often start with the sudden onset of nausea followed by projectile vomiting and watery diarrhoea.

Some people may also have a raised temperature, headaches and aching limbs.

Most people make a full recovery within one to two days. However, some (usually the very young or elderly) may become very dehydrated and require hospital treatment.

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### **Why does Norovirus often cause outbreaks?**

Norovirus often causes outbreaks because it is easily spread from one person to another and is able to survive in the environment for many days.

Because there are many different strains of Norovirus, and immunity does not last long, outbreaks can affect a lot of people..

Outbreaks usually tend to affect people who are in semi-closed environments such as hospitals, nursing homes, schools and on cruise ships.

### **How can these outbreaks be stopped?**

Outbreaks can be difficult to control and long-lasting because Norovirus is easily transmitted from one person to another.

The most effective way to respond to an outbreak is to restrict the amount of people in the area, and disinfect contaminated areas. It is also very important to have good hygiene measures including hand washing, providing advice on food handling and also isolating those infected for up to 72 hours after their symptoms have ceased.

### **How is Norovirus treated?**

There is no specific treatment for Norovirus apart from letting the illness run its course. It is important to drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration.

### **If I am suffering from Norovirus, how can I prevent others from becoming infected?**

The best way of preventing spread of infection is to quarantine yourself until you have been symptom-free for at least 72 hours. Do not visit the hospital as a visitor. If you are a patient you must tell staff that you have, or have recently had Norovirus.

Good hygiene is important in preventing others from becoming infected – this includes:

- ◆ Thorough hand washing with soap and water before and after contact.
- ◆ A bleach-based cleaner is recommended for the lavatory and hard surfaces.
- ◆ Food preparation should also be avoided until three days after symptoms have gone altogether.

### **Who is at risk of getting Norovirus?**

Norovirus affects people of all ages. Anywhere that large numbers of people congregate for periods of several days provides an ideal environment for the spread of the disease. Staff, patients and visitors can all be affected by Norovirus. This can be very disruptive for the running of the hospital.

A recent study by the Health Protection Agency shows that outbreaks are shortened when control measures are implemented quickly. These include closing wards to new admissions within four days of the beginning of the outbreak and implementing strict hygiene measures.

### **How common is Norovirus?**

It is estimated that Norovirus affects between 600,000 and a million people in the UK each year.

### **Are there any long-term effects?**

No, there are no long term effects from Norovirus.

### **What can be done to prevent infection?**

It is impossible to prevent infection; however, taking good hygiene measures (such as frequent hand washing) around someone who is infected is important.

Certain measures can be taken in the event of an outbreak, including the implementation of basic hygiene and food handling measures and prompt disinfection of contaminated areas, and the isolation of those infected for 72 hours after their symptoms have ceased.

### **How can I help myself to get better if I get Norovirus?**

If you get Norovirus, or sickness and diarrhoea, drink plenty of fluids to keep yourself rehydrated. Dehydration is the main complication of sickness bugs and taking regular sips of water will stop dehydration. You should also rest and, if you feel hungry, eat plain foods like dry toast or crackers. Do not return to work or school until you are completely well.

By staying at home you also restrict the spread of the virus, meaning other people are less likely to catch it! Always follow good hand hygiene practices by washing your hands with soap and water.

### **Should I come to hospital if I have Norovirus?**

Norovirus is usually a short-lived illness that will make you sick and feel poorly for up to three days. Most otherwise healthy people recover completely after this time, but occasionally vulnerable people – usually the very elderly – can suffer complications, the most frequent of which is dehydration.

**Contact NHS Direct on 0845 46 47** for advice in the first instance, or contact your GP if your symptoms have:

- ◆ not improved after three days of sickness, or

- ◆ if you experience sudden worsening of symptoms or pain, or
- ◆ suspect you, or someone you are caring for is severely dehydrated, contact NHS Direct

If you have Norovirus, any tummy bug, or coughs and colds, please do not visit friends or relatives who are patients at the hospital. You may well infect them or others and could cause an outbreak in the hospital. Wait until you have been symptom free (e.g. no sickness or diarrhoea) for 72 hours before coming in to visit. When you do visit, remember to wash your hands before entering and when leaving the ward.

Infection Prevention and Control Service  
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