

Norovirus Fact Sheet

What is norovirus?

Norovirus is a very contagious virus that causes acute vomiting and diarrhea. Norovirus can survive for weeks on surfaces and objects, such as countertops, doorknobs, phones, and furniture. It can spread quickly in closed and crowded places such as hospitals, nursing homes, schools, and cruise ships. It is sometimes called “stomach flu” but is not related to flu viruses, which mainly cause respiratory illness.

How common is norovirus infection?

Norovirus is the most common cause of acute gastroenteritis in the United States. It causes an estimated 19 to 21 million illnesses each year. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, norovirus contributes to 56,000 to 71,000 hospitalizations and 570 to 800 deaths each year in the United States.

When does norovirus infection occur?

It is possible to get sick with norovirus at any time of the year, but illnesses are most common between November and April.

Can a person get norovirus infection more than once?

A person can get norovirus more than once because there are many strains, which can spread at different times and in different geographic areas. When new strains appear, there may be an increase in norovirus illness.

How do people get norovirus infection?

Norovirus is found in the vomit and feces of infected people. When a sick person vomits, norovirus can spray into the air and settle in nearby surfaces and objects. Unwashed hands can also spread fecal matter and contaminate foods. Typically, a person is contagious as soon as they feel ill, until a few days after they feel better. However, an ill person may be contagious for two weeks or longer after feeling better. People can get norovirus in several ways, including:

- Having contact with an ill person, such as caring for or sharing foods or eating utensils with a sick person, or by changing diapers of a sick child.
- Eating food or drinking liquid that contains norovirus, such as food touched by an ill person, or undercooked shellfish from contaminated waters.
- Touching contaminated surfaces or objects and then touching their mouth or food before washing their hands.
- Sharing toilet facilities with an ill person.
- Cleaning up vomit or diarrhea from an ill person without protective gear, such as gloves, masks, and gowns.

What are the symptoms of norovirus infection?

Symptoms of norovirus usually begin 12 to 48 hours after a person has come in contact with the virus, and last for 1 to 3 days. Common symptoms include vomiting, nausea, diarrhea, and stomach cramps. Other symptoms can include a low-grade fever, headache, and body aches.

A person with norovirus can feel very ill and vomit or have diarrhea many times a day. This can cause dehydration, especially in young children, older adults, and people with other illnesses. Signs of dehydration can include urinating less than usual, having a dry mouth and throat, or feeling dizzy when standing up. Children who are dehydrated may cry with few or no tears and be unusually sleepy or fussy.

How is norovirus infection diagnosed?

Norovirus infection can be diagnosed by testing a person's feces. During an outbreak of illness, laboratory testing by a healthcare provider or public health laboratory is critical to identify and control the source of infection.

How is norovirus infection treated?

There are no specific treatments for norovirus. It cannot be treated with antibiotics, because it is not caused by bacteria. Drinking fluids is important to replace fluid lost from vomiting and diarrhea and to prevent dehydration. A person should visit a doctor if they become dehydrated.

How can you prevent norovirus infection?

- Wash hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after toilet visits, changing diapers, and before touching food. Of note, hand sanitizers are usually not as effective against norovirus as handwashing with soap and water.
- Carefully wash fruits and vegetables, and fully cook oysters and other shellfish before eating. Temperatures above 60°C /140°F will kill norovirus.
- When 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, nursing home, school, cruise ship, or food-handling job).
- Do NOT cook, prepare, or serve food, or care for others for at least 2 days after you feel better.
- If you vomit or have diarrhea in a public toilet, such as one in a hospital, school, restaurant, or cruise ship, let the staff know so they can properly clean and disinfect.
- Clean and disinfect areas contaminated by vomiting or diarrhea with a solution of 3/4 cup concentrated bleach (or 1 cup of regular bleach) in 1 gallon of water.

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

The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) and local health departments (LHDs) track norovirus outbreaks. Although healthcare providers are not required to report single cases of norovirus to their LHDs, outbreaks should be reported. When outbreaks are reported, CDPH and LHDs will investigate to find the cause of the outbreak, prevent further infections, and educate the public.

Where can I get more information on norovirus?

- The [CDPH Norovirus webpage](https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/Norovirus.aspx) at: <https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/DCDC/Pages/Norovirus.aspx>.
- The [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Norovirus webpage](http://www.cdc.gov/norovirus/index.html) at: <http://www.cdc.gov/norovirus/index.html>.

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