

NOROVIRUS

An information leaflet for health and social care staff

What is Norovirus?

Norovirus is a common cause of viral gastro-enteritis. It is often known as 'winter vomiting disease'. Although it is true that there is an increase in winter months, unfortunately, cases occur in all seasons.

Norovirus is highly infectious and easily spread within communities and particularly in establishments where people mix such as hospitals, care homes, schools, hotels, holiday resorts, and cruise ships.

Outbreaks occurring in these settings lead to disruption of services, such as ward closures and cancelled admissions. It is important to avoid introducing norovirus into these establishments if possible and take measures to reduce the spread of infection.

The illness characteristically starts with the **sudden onset** of vomiting, which can be severe and projectile. Some people may develop diarrhoea.

After exposure to the virus, illness may start between 12 and 48 hours later. Norovirus is not caught from animals. Generally the symptoms last for about 24 – 48 hours, after which the person may feel lethargic or washed-out for another day or so.

There are no long-term effects of norovirus infection and antibiotic treatment has **no** effect on norovirus and should be avoided. Most people will make a full recovery within 48 hours.

The frail, elderly and very young can become dehydrated, so people with symptoms of norovirus should keep hydrated by drinking fluids as tolerated.

How is Norovirus spread?

Norovirus is **highly infectious** and may be spread by:

- Contact with an infected person, especially their vomit or diarrhoea, including being close to a person while they are vomiting. Hand washing is essential in preventing spread.
- Contact with surfaces that have been contaminated by the virus, e.g. around the toilet or near where someone has vomited, or areas touched by contaminated hands. Norovirus can survive for several days on surfaces, so cleaning and disinfection is essential.
- Eating food, such as fruit, salads and unwrapped sweets, that have been contaminated by a case
- Eating foods at high risk of contamination, such as oysters.

Preventing spread – segregation of cases

People with symptoms of norovirus should stay at home and not go to work, school or pre-school until they have been **completely free from symptoms for at least 48 hours** (this includes nausea).

Ideally cases of norovirus should be nursed at home, and admission to hospital or visits to the GP or A&E avoided where possible. Where this is unavoidable, telephone ahead so that the hospital staff and general practice can make arrangements to isolate the patient.

In establishments such as care homes and boarding schools, people with symptoms should be nursed in a single room or isolation until they have been symptom free for at least 48 hours. During outbreaks care homes may need to be closed to admissions and transfers until the outbreak is over.

Preventing spread – hand washing

Good hand washing is essential to control the spread of norovirus:

- **Before, e.g.:**
 - preparing or serving food and eating meals
 - giving care
 - undertaking a clinical procedure
- **After, e.g.:**
 - going to the toilet
 - dealing with any clients
 - handling contaminated clothes or bedding
 - contact with equipment/environment
 - changing nappies
 - preparing food
 - cleaning up / doing housework

Use liquid soap and warm water to wash all surfaces of the hands, rinse under running water and dry thoroughly. **Alcohol hand gel is not effective against norovirus.**

People with symptoms should use separate towels and ideally have their own toilet until they have fully recovered.

Preventing spread – food handling

People with symptoms of norovirus should **not** prepare or handle food for others until they have been completely free of symptoms **for at least 48 hours** (this includes nausea).

If someone vomits in a food handling area, the area must be thoroughly cleaned with detergent and hot water and then sanitised using a hypochlorite (or bleach) solution (1000ppm) or a combined detergent / hypochlorite product.

Edible items, such as fruit or salads, in the proximity of a person while vomiting should be thrown away as a precaution.

Preventing spread – toilets and hand wash basins

When outbreaks are suspected in an establishment the frequency of cleaning toilets, hand wash basins and bathrooms should be increased to at least twice a day **and** after use by an affected person. See the cleaning and disinfection section.

Use disposable cloths and pay particular attention to frequently touched surfaces including:

- Toilets, including seats and flush handles
- Door handles and contact plates
- Wash hand basins, including the taps
- Low level horizontal surfaces
- Light switches and grab rails

Preventing spread – cleaning and disinfection in the home

Norovirus is highly infectious, so care is needed when handling diarrhoea or vomit and when undertaking the following cleaning and disinfecting procedures:

- Ventilate the area thoroughly by opening windows
- Wear disposable gloves and apron
- Keep the area of contamination as small as possible. Cover spills of vomit/diarrhoea with paper towels or kitchen tissue. This may be flushed down the toilet
- Waste may be wrapped in a plastic bag and discarded
- Wash the area thoroughly with detergent and water. Then disinfect the surface using by a hypochlorite bleach solution (1000ppm) or a combined detergent / hypochlorite product
- Rinse the area with clean water and allow it to dry
- Ensure that horizontal surfaces up to two metres beyond the visually contaminated area is cleaned and disinfected because the virus can land several metres away
- For hard surfaces, like baths and door handles, a bathroom cleanser should be used
- Contaminated carpets may be cleaned using a proprietary carpet shampoo or steam cleaner, if available. In the absence of this type of equipment thorough cleaning with hot water and detergent is a minimum action. Always rinse with clean water and allow the carpet to dry before using the area again
- After cleaning, discard disposable plastic aprons and gloves to waste. Wash any non-disposable equipment used in detergent and hot water and allow them to dry
- Enhanced regular cleaning of toilet seats, flush handles, wash-hand basin taps, surfaces and toilet door handles will help stop the spread of infection and it is best to use hot water and a product that is effective against viruses
- **After removing gloves and apron, wash hands using soap and water and dry well.**

Preventing spread – care of soiled articles

At home an ill person should normally use the toilet. If urinals, commodes and bedpans are used, the carer should wear CE marked disposable gloves and a disposable apron when attending the patient. Bedpans and urinals may be single use and discarded with contents into a macerator if available. If they are reusable, the contents should be emptied into a toilet bowl or slop-hopper and the item ideally heat disinfected using a bedpan washer-disinfector. If not available, wash using detergent and warm water, then disinfect using a chlorine-releasing product, rinse and dry.

Avoid rough handling of soiled laundry as this may disperse the virus to nearby surfaces, providing an opportunity for spread of infection.

Soiled clothing and bed linen should be washed separately in a washing machine on the hottest cycle the material can withstand. If the washing machine does not have a sluice cycle, flush away heavy soiling into the toilet bowl. After loading, clean the outer surfaces of the washing machine with detergent and hot water.

When finished, wash and dry your hands.

Use of hypochlorite bleach

After cleaning, a chlorine-releasing product is recommended for use against norovirus. The preferred disinfectant is 0.1% sodium hypochlorite (1000 parts per million available Chlorine). Follow the manufacturer's instructions and **never mix** different types of chemical as the fumes can be dangerous.

If a bleach is used, a good quality chlorine based (hypochlorite) bleach made to a British Standard (BS 5197 or 6424) is required.

Store chemicals safely according to local policy and ensure that children do **not** have access to these solutions.

Bleach and other chlorine-releasing agents will bleach the colour from fabrics and floor coverings and can burn the skin.

Reporting cases and accessing further information

Report suspected outbreaks to the local Public Health England (PHE) Centre as soon as possible. Further information can be obtained from:

- Local PHE Centre – South West Health Protection Team (SWHPT) on Tel: 0300 303 8162
- Local Community Infection Prevention and Control Team, if applicable
- Further information on norovirus infection is available on the website:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/norovirus-managing-outbreaks-in-acute-and-community-health-and-social-care-settings>
- The NHS non-emergency number 111