

Norovirus (diarrhoea and vomiting virus)

Information for patients, carers and relatives

What is Norovirus?

Noroviruses are a group of viruses that are a common cause of gastroenteritis (diarrhoea and vomiting). Norovirus is sometimes known as “winter vomiting virus”.

Norovirus affects people of all ages, and outbreaks of the virus are reported frequently in places where large numbers of people congregate. This includes hospitals, schools, residential and nursing homes and cruise ships.

Norovirus often causes outbreaks because it is easily spread from one person to another. The virus is also able to survive in the environment for many days. Good hygiene is important in preventing others from becoming infected — this includes thorough hand washing before and after contact with an infected person.

How does Norovirus spread?

When people vomit or have diarrhoea, the Norovirus enters the environment and lands on surfaces and equipment surrounding. The virus can then be transmitted to people by contact with contaminated surfaces and objects. It can also be passed on by direct physical contact with an infected person whilst they are having an episode of diarrhoea or vomiting.

Norovirus spreads easily in hospitals due to close contact between patients and staff. It is a highly infectious virus and therefore spreads quickly.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms include sudden onset of nausea (feeling sick), followed by severe vomiting and watery diarrhoea. Some people may have a raised temperature, headaches and aching limbs.

How is Norovirus treated?

There is no specific treatment for Norovirus infection – it gets better on its own. It is important to drink plenty of clear fluids to prevent dehydration.

If symptoms are severe, your doctor may prescribe anti-sickness medication and/or medication to lessen the diarrhoea.

Usually patients with Norovirus are nursed in isolation. This is to prevent the spread of the virus to other patients. Sometimes, if several patients have Norovirus, they will be nursed together in a ward bay.

Advice for visitors

- If you have had diarrhoea or vomiting, you should not come to the hospital to visit a friend or relative until you have been 48 hours clear since the last symptom of diarrhoea and/or vomiting.
- Domestic dishwashers provide the safest and most efficient way of cleaning crockery and cutlery at home to prevent the spread of the virus.
- You may be asked to speak to the nursing staff when you enter a ward and before you visit your friend or relative.
- If your relative or friend is affected with diarrhoea and/or vomiting, you should only visit if it is absolutely necessary.
- You must wash your hands before and after visiting a patient who has diarrhoea and/or vomiting. Also, use the hand disinfectant when you enter and leave the ward.
- Please restrict your hospital visiting to one ward during an outbreak of Norovirus.
- Please do not visit any patients other than your own relative or friend.
- You do not need to put on gloves and aprons unless you are assisting with the personal care of a patient. Speak to the nursing staff about this.
- If the person you are visiting has diarrhoea and/ or vomiting and you are taking home clothing to wash; the clothes should be placed in a water soluble bag which goes directly into the washing machine (so there is no need to touch soiled clothes). However you should clean your hands with soap and water after handling the soiled clothes. A wash cycle of 60°C is recommended in a household washing machine.

For more information

You can find out more about Norovirus by:

- Asking your community hospital nursing staff or doctor
- Asking your GP or practice nurse.

Infection control

This leaflet is one in a series about infection control. Others in the series are:

- Preventing and controlling healthcare associated infections
- MRSA
- Clostridium difficile