

FAQ: Norovirus

What are noroviruses? Noroviruses are a group of viruses that cause the “stomach flu,” or gastroenteritis, in people. The term norovirus was recently approved as the official name for this group of viruses.

What are the symptoms of illness caused by noroviruses? The symptoms of norovirus illness usually include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and some stomach cramping. Sometimes people additionally have a low-grade fever, chills, headache, muscle aches, and a general sense of tiredness. The illness often begins suddenly, and the infected person may feel very sick. The illness is usually brief, with symptoms lasting only about 1 or 2 days. In general, children experience more vomiting than adults. Most people with norovirus illness have both of these symptoms.

How serious is norovirus? Norovirus is usually not serious, although people may feel very sick and vomit many times a day. Most people get better within one or two days, and have no long-term health effects related to their illness. However, sometimes people are unable to drink enough liquids to replace liquids they lost because of vomiting and diarrhea. These individuals can become dehydrated and may need special medical attention. This problem with dehydration is usually only seen among the very young, the elderly and persons with weakened immune systems.

How do people become infected with noroviruses? Noroviruses are found in the stool or vomit of infected people. People can become infected with the virus in several ways, including:

- Eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated with norovirus;
- touching surfaces or objects contaminated with norovirus, and then placing their hand in their mouth;
- Having direct contact with another person who is infected and showing symptoms (for example, when caring for someone with illness, or sharing foods or eating utensils with someone who is ill).
- After the storm, people in close environments, such as shelters or those working in daycare centers or nursing homes, should pay special attention to children or residents who have norovirus illness. This virus is very contagious and can spread rapidly throughout such environments.

When do symptoms appear? Symptoms of norovirus usually begin about 24 to 48 hours after ingestion of the virus, but can appear as early as 12 hours after exposure.

Are noroviruses contagious? Noroviruses are *very contagious* and can spread easily from person to person. Both stool and vomit are infectious. People infected with norovirus are contagious from the moment they begin feeling ill to at least three days after recovery. Some people may be contagious for as long as two weeks after recovery. Therefore, it's very important for people to use good hand washing and other hygienic practices after they have recently recovered from norovirus illness.

What treatment is available for people with norovirus infection? Currently, there is no antiviral medication for use against norovirus and there is no vaccine to prevent it. Norovirus infection cannot be treated with antibiotics. This is because antibiotics work to fight *bacteria* – not *viruses*.

Norovirus illness is usually brief in healthy individuals. When people are ill with vomiting and diarrhea, they should drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration. Dehydration is the most serious health effect that can result from norovirus infection.

Can norovirus infections be prevented? You can decrease your chance of coming in contact with noroviruses by following these preventive steps:

- Wash your hands frequently, especially after toilet visits and changing diapers, and before eating or preparing food.
- Carefully wash fruits and vegetables and steam oysters before eating them.
- Thoroughly clean and disinfect contaminated surfaces immediately after an episode of illness by using a bleach-based household cleaner.
- Immediately remove and wash clothing or linens that may be contaminated with virus after an episode of illness (use hot water and soap).
- Flush or discard any vomit and/or stool in the toilet and make sure that the surrounding area is kept clean.
- People who are infected with norovirus shouldn't prepare food while they have symptoms and for at least three days after they recover from their illness. Food that may have been contaminated by an ill person should be disposed of properly.

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