

Kent County Health Department Norovirus Fact Sheet



What are noroviruses?

Noroviruses are a group of viruses that cause the “stomach flu”. In the past, they were known as “Norwalk-like viruses”.

How do you get an infection?

Noroviruses are found in the stool or vomit of infected people. People can become infected several ways:

- Eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated with norovirus
- Touching contaminated surfaces or objects, and then placing their hand in their mouth
- Having direct contact with someone who is sick and showing symptoms
- Droplets in the air from vomitus that enter the mouth, eyes or nose

What are the symptoms?

Common symptoms include:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Stomach cramps

Other symptoms may include:

- Headache
- Fever
- Chills
- Muscle aches

How soon do symptoms start?

The illness often starts very suddenly. Symptoms usually begin 24 to 48 hours after picking up the virus, but can appear as soon as 12 hours after exposure. The illness is usually brief with symptoms usually lasting one or two days.

How serious is norovirus infection?

Norovirus infection is usually not serious, although people may feel very sick and vomit many times a day. Sometimes people are unable to drink enough liquids to replace the liquids they lost because of vomiting and diarrhea. These people can get dehydrated and may need special medical attention. People most at risk are:

- Very young
- Elderly
- Those with weakened immune systems

Are noroviruses contagious?

They are very contagious. They can spread easily from person to person.

How long is an infected person infectious to others?

People infected with norovirus are contagious from the moment they begin feeling sick to at least three days after recovery. Some people may be contagious for as long as two weeks after recovery.

How is an infection treated?

An infection cannot be treated with antibiotics. This is because antibiotics do not kill viruses.

Currently, there is no antiviral medication that works against norovirus and no vaccine to prevent infection.

How can norovirus infections be prevented?

You can lower your chance of coming in contact with noroviruses by:

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- Washing your hands often, especially after using the bathroom, changing diapers, and before making or eating food
- Washing fruits and vegetables before eating
- Steaming oysters before eating
- Thoroughly cleaning and disinfecting contaminated surfaces right after someone is sick by using a bleach-based household cleaner
- Making sure anyone with diarrhea, especially children, wash their hands carefully and often with soap to lower the risk of spreading the infection
- Removing and washing clothing, sheets or towels that may be contaminated with virus after someone is sick
- Flushing any vomitus and/or stool down the toilet and making sure the surrounding area is kept clean

People with norovirus should not make food while they have symptoms and for three days after they recover from their illness to prevent spreading the infection.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for talking with a health care provider. If you have any questions about norovirus or think you may have it, call your health care provider.