



NOROVIRUSES

What is a norovirus?

Noroviruses are a group of viruses that cause gastrointestinal illness (gastroenteritis). The group of viruses are known previously as “Norwalk-like viruses.” While it is commonly called the “stomach flu”, it is not related to the true respiratory flu (influenza). While the annual flu shot protects against respiratory influenza, it gives no protection against intestinal illnesses. Noroviruses can be highly contagious and spreads quickly among family members and group settings. The virus is a common cause of gastroenteritis outbreaks on cruise ships, schools, childcare centers and nursing homes.

Anyone can be infected with these viruses. There are many different strains (types) of the norovirus, which makes it difficult for a person to develop long-lasting protection or immunity. That means that norovirus illness can recur throughout a person’s lifetime.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of noroviruses generally have a sudden onset and include: nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and stomach cramps. However, headaches, body aches, chills and low grade fever may occasionally occur. Fortunately, the symptoms are short-lived and most people report vomiting and diarrhea lasting 24-48 hours (frequently less than 24 hours). It is not unusual for aching, loss of appetite, stomach cramps and weakness to persist for several days after the nausea and vomiting stop.

The incubation, or period of time from exposure to the virus to onset of symptoms is generally 1-2 days. Symptoms of norovirus illness usually begin 24 to 48 hours after the virus is ingested or swallowed, but may develop as early as 12 hours.

Individuals infected with noroviruses are contagious (communicable) from onset of symptoms to at least 3 days after symptoms have resolved.

How are noroviruses spread?

Noroviruses are found in the stool and vomit of infected individuals. The virus is primarily transmitted (spread) through the fecal-oral route, either by direct person-to-person contact or ingestion (swallowing) of contaminated food or water. An example of food is uncooked shellfish that has been harvested from contaminated waters.

Touching surfaces or objects contaminated with the norovirus, and then touching your mouth or eating without washing your hands first is another possible way of spreading illness. Noroviruses can also be spread via droplets from vomitus (vomited contents of the stomach). Though norovirus is an intestinal pathogen or germ, aerosols could, if inhaled, settle in the pharynx and later be swallowed.

How can noroviruses be prevented?

There are several ways to prevent and/or reduce the spread of germs, including noroviruses. Most ways are simple and require little or no planning. It is important to use common sense and follow basic rules for good health.

PREVENTION TIPS:

1. Both vomitus and diarrhea are infectious. If available, use gloves and if possible, a mask when cleaning. Remember to wash hands carefully after removing gloves.
2. If you are helping a person who is actively vomiting or has diarrhea and a mask and gloves are not available, be extremely careful with hand washing.
3. When doing laundry, get clothing below the water level quickly. Do not shake out the clothing or bedding to be laundered. Germs can become airborne.
4. The germs can live on surfaces. After cleaning areas (bedrooms, bathrooms, car) where someone has been ill, make sure to sanitize by using a commercially approved sanitizer that kills viruses (will have the word "virucidal" on the label) or a solution of 1 part bleach and 10 parts water. (It is important to make a new homemade cleaning solution daily.)
5. Try to keep the sick person away from those who are well during the time the sick person is actively vomiting or having diarrhea. If possible, the sick person should use one bathroom separate from those who are not ill. Place a roll of paper towels in each bathroom. When you wash your hands, turn on the water, wash your hands for approximately 20 seconds (2 choruses of "Row, row, row your boat"), rinse your hands in the running water, use a piece of paper towel to dry your hands, then use the towel to turn off the faucet and open the bathroom door. Drop the paper towel in the trashcan.
6. Any person with diarrhea and at least 3 days after vomiting and/or diarrhea stops, should not prepare food, either at home or as part of a job.
7. During the time the person is ill, offer clear fluids frequently and in small amounts. As eating resumes, begin with small amounts of bland or non-spicy foods and progress the diet as the individual tolerates.
8. The stool is infectious for several days after symptoms end. **Please stay at home or keep the sick individual at home for a minimum of 24 hours after vomiting and/or diarrhea have stopped.**
9. Any individual who contracts a gastrointestinal illness that is accompanied by fever, severe abdominal pain, blood in the vomit or diarrhea, signs of dehydration, or lasts longer than two days, should see their doctor for an evaluation.
10. Steam oysters before eating them. Avoid raw (uncooked) shellfish.
11. Be a role model. Practice and educate on the importance of GOOD HANDWASHING!

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

SCPH Communicable Disease Unit 330-375-2662
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov
Mayo Clinic www.mayoclinic.com
Minnesota Department of Health www.health.state.mn.us