

Norovirus Infection

Noroviruses are members of a group of viruses called caliciviruses, also known previously as 'Norwalk-like viruses' or small round structured viruses. Norovirus infection is also called viral gastroenteritis.

Norovirus infection causes gastroenteritis, which is an inflammation of the stomach and the small and large intestines. Noroviruses are a very common cause of gastroenteritis outbreaks in South Australia.

Common symptoms include:

- > nausea
- > vomiting
- > diarrhoea
- > abdominal cramps.

Other symptoms may include:

- > headache
- > low grade fever
- > chills
- > muscle aches
- > general sense of tiredness.

Illness often begins suddenly and symptoms usually last one or two days. However, during that brief period people can feel very ill and vomit, often violently and without warning, many times a day.

Noroviruses are very contagious and can spread easily from person to person. Both stool and vomit are infectious. People can become infected with the virus in several ways, including:

- > eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated with norovirus by food handlers who have not washed their hands adequately or from environmental contamination
- > touching surfaces or objects contaminated with norovirus and then placing their hands in their mouth, or eating before washing their hands
- > having direct contact with another person who is infected (for example, when caring for someone with illness, or sharing foods or eating utensils with someone who is ill).

Diagnosis can be made by PCR testing of a faecal specimen, but is usually only done for investigation of outbreaks.

Incubation period

(time between becoming infected and developing symptoms)

Symptoms usually begin 24 to 48 hours after ingestion of the virus, but can appear as early as 12 hours after exposure.

Infectious period

(time during which an infected person can infect others)

Norovirus can be found in the stool and vomit of infected persons from the day they start to feel ill to as long as 2 weeks after they recover.

Treatment

No specific therapy exists for norovirus infection and there is no vaccine available.

The following are general recommendations for the treatment of gastroenteritis:

- > Give plenty of fluids. Oral rehydration solution is highly recommended for children with mild to moderate dehydration. It is available at pharmacies and should be administered following the instructions on the packaging.
- > Mildly unwell children should be given their usual fluids more often. Carbonated (fizzy) drinks or undiluted juice should be avoided.
- > Medicines to prevent vomiting or diarrhoea should not be given (especially in children), except where specifically advised by a doctor.
- > Breastfed babies should continue to be breastfed throughout their illness.
- > Children on formula or solid diets should restart their normal diet (including full strength lactose containing milk) following rehydration with oral rehydration solution.
- > Children who are hungry or ask for food should be given small portions of their usual foods, but avoid foods high in sugar or fat.

Norovirus Infection (cont.)

Control of spread

- > Exclude from child care, preschool, school and work until there has been no diarrhoea or vomiting for 24 hours. If working in a child care, health care or commercial food setting, the exclusion period should be 48 hours.
- > Wash hands after using the bathroom and changing nappies.
- > Wash hands before eating, or preparing food for yourself or others.
- > Good food handling procedures should always be followed.
- > Persons working in day care centres 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.
- > Immediately remove and wash clothing or bedding that may be contaminated with virus after an episode of vomiting and diarrhoea (use hot water and soap).
- > After an episode of vomiting and diarrhoea, thoroughly clean contaminated surfaces with detergent and water and then disinfect contaminated surfaces immediately by using a household bleach diluted according to the manufacturer's instructions.
- > Flush or discard any vomitus and/or stool in the toilet and make sure that the surrounding area is kept clean.

- > PCR
- > Hand Hygiene
- > Keeping Areas Clean
- > Preventing Food Poisoning at Home
- > Collecting a Faecal Sample