

Norovirus

Norovirus is a highly contagious illness caused by a virus. It is often called by other names such as a stomach flu, food poisoning and viral gastroenteritis (GAS-tro-en-ter-I-tis). Noroviruses are found in the stool and vomit of infected people.

Anyone can be infected with noroviruses and get sick. You can get infected with norovirus more than once in your life. One reason for this is because there are different types of noroviruses and being infected with one type does not always protect against infection from another type.

The illness begins suddenly and people with norovirus are contagious from the moment they begin to feel sick and for as long as 2 weeks after recovery. Symptoms include stomach cramps, vomiting, nausea and diarrhea. Some people may also experience low-grade fever, chills, headache, body aches and fatigue. Those infected with norovirus are most contagious from the moment they begin to feel sick to as long as two weeks after recovery. The virus stays in the stool for 2 weeks or more after the infected person feels better. Most people get better within 1-3 days. Dehydration can be a problem for people who are infected with norovirus. It is important to drink liquids to replace fluid lost when vomiting or diarrhea.

Noroviruses are the most common cause of gastroenteritis in the US. It is estimated that each year, more than 20 million cases of gastroenteritis are caused by norovirus. That means that 1 in every 15 Americans will become ill from norovirus each year. In New Jersey, approximately 100 norovirus outbreaks are reported to the health department each fall-winter season.

A sick food handler can easily contaminate the food he or she is handling. Many of those eating the contaminated food may become ill and an outbreak may result.

Noroviruses can spread quickly from person to person in crowded, closed places like long-term care facilities, daycare centers, schools, hotels, summer camps, hospitals, family dinners, restaurants, and cruise ships. In other words, places where people often eat food that is prepared or handled by others.



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Noroviruses can also be a major cause of gastroenteritis in restaurants and catered-meal settings if contaminated food is served and is a leading cause of disease from contaminated foods. Foods that are most commonly involved in norovirus outbreaks include leafy greens and ready-to-eat foods. However, any food item that is served raw or handled after being cooked can become contaminated with norovirus.

You can be exposed to norovirus by:

- Eating food or drinking liquid that are contaminated with norovirus (someone gets stool or vomit on their hands and then touches food or drink)
- Touching surfaces or objects contaminated with norovirus and then putting your hand or fingers in your mouth
- Having direct contact with a person who is infected with norovirus (for example, when caring for someone with norovirus or sharing food or eating utensils with them)

There is no vaccine to prevent norovirus infection and there is no drug to treat it. Antibiotics are not effective against viruses.

The best way to reduce the risk of getting norovirus is to:

- Practice good hand hygiene. Wash your hands with soap and water, especially after using the toilet and changing diapers. Remember, alcohol-based sanitizers are not effective against norovirus.
- Carefully wash fruits and vegetables and cook oysters and other shellfish before eating them.
- Do not prepare food while infected or while have symptoms of norovirus. Foodhandlers should wait 3 days after they recover from their illness.
- Clean and disinfect contaminated surfaces. After throwing up or having diarrhea, immediately clean surfaces by using bleach-based household cleaner as directed on the product label or a diluted bleach solution (5-25 tablespoons of household bleach per gallon of water). Never use undiluted bleach.
- Remove and wash clothing and linens that may be contaminated with vomit or stool. Handle soiled items carefully to avoid spreading the virus. If available, wear rubber disposable gloves while handling soiled clothing or linens and wash your hands after handling. Items should be washed with detergent at the maximum cycle length and machine dried.
- Report all outbreaks to the local health department.

For more information, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/revb/gastro/norovirus.htm>.



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