

Norovirus (also known as 'winter vomiting bug', gastric flu or Norwalk-like virus)

An information leaflet for patients and relatives

What is Norovirus?

Norovirus is a type of viral gastro-enteritis that causes symptoms of diarrhoea and/or vomiting. It is the most common cause of gut infection in the UK. It causes disease only in humans and can affect people of all ages. Once you've had the infection, you acquire short term immunity only and this means it is possible to have the infection several times in your lifetime.

Although it is sometimes called the 'winter vomiting bug' it can affect people all year round.

Signs and symptoms:

- Vomiting (often sudden and projectile)
- Nausea
- Abdominal pain
- Diarrhoea
- Fever
- Headache and muscle pain.

The incubation period is usually one to two days after becoming infected.

You may have one or more of these symptoms. They usually last for up to two to three days and most people make a full and speedy recovery.

How is Norovirus diagnosed?

If it is suspected that you have Norovirus a stool sample will be sent to the laboratory where it is tested. It may also be diagnosed on presentation of your symptoms.

How is it spread?

Norovirus is spread extremely easily from one person to another:

- Through exposure to viruses in the vomit of an affected individual
- Through touching surfaces and objects that have the virus on them eg doors handles particles
- Airborne spread may occur.

Only a few particles are needed for an infection to occur. The infection can spread quickly (in many ways similarly to the common cold), particularly in places where large numbers of people gather together such as schools, nursing homes, hospitals, hotels and cruise ships.

Outbreaks of Norovirus are common in both community and healthcare settings. People remain infectious for up to 48-72 hours after symptoms have stopped.

How is Norovirus treated?

There is no specific treatment available. Although it is an unpleasant disease, it is a self-limiting illness and very rarely dangerous. Drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration and try to get lots of rest.

Prevention

Good hand washing is the key to preventing Norovirus infection. It is particularly important to wash your hands before handling food and after using the toilet. Anyone experiencing diarrhoea should not handle or prepare food for others.

The virus can live on floors and other surfaces for several days, so it is important to clean vomit and diarrhoea properly, using a disinfectant that contains bleach.

Good hand hygiene is one of the best ways of tackling Norovirus. Use soap and water as alcohol hand rub is not effective against Norovirus.

What happens if I have Norovirus while I'm in the hospice?

If you have symptoms of diarrhoea and/ or vomiting and Norovirus is suspected or confirmed, you will need to remain in your room until you have fully recovered.

Please remember to wash your hands with soap and water or hand hygiene wipes after using the toilet or commode and before eating and drinking.

Staff will wear disposable gloves and plastic aprons when caring for you, and will wash their hands regularly with soap and water as alcohol hand rub is not effective prevention against Norovirus.

Your room and surfaces will be cleaned thoroughly twice a day.

Can I have visitors?

Whilst you have symptoms of diarrhoea and/or vomiting and Norovirus is suspected or confirmed, please limit your visitors to essential visiting only with no more than two visitors by your bedside at any one time. However, our staff will advise you on this.

If your visitors have symptoms of diarrhoea and/or vomiting they should not visit until they are fully recovered.

Visitors should wash their hands with soap and water on entering the Inpatient Unit (IPU) and before leaving the IPU visitors must use the toilets in reception and must not use the toilet in your ensuite.

Effects of a Norovirus outbreak in the hospice

We would declare an outbreak of Norovirus if several patients were suspected or confirmed to have Norovirus. To help contain an outbreak as much as possible, our IPU may be closed to new admissions. This is to prevent unaffected patients from being infected.

In addition, discharges to other care facilities such as care homes may be delayed until the affected area is free from infection. Patients can be discharged to their own homes if they are fit for discharge. **(Text adapted from the Norovirus leaflet from the Department of Infection Prevention and Control)**