



Medical

Directorate

22 January 2010

Outbreak of Norovirus (winter vomiting)

In the last two weeks there has been a rise in cases of norovirus (winter vomiting virus) both nationally and in the capital. This group of viruses are the most common cause of gastroenteritis (stomach bugs) in England.

Staff are urged to follow the guidance contained in this bulletin to minimise the risk of becoming infected, or infecting your family, colleagues, or patients.

Please ensure you follow universal infection control guidelines when attending a patient with diarrhoea and vomiting including the cleaning of the vehicle after transporting a symptomatic patient.

Good regular hand washing with soap and water is essential to reduce the risk of catching or spreading norovirus.

Staff who are unwell with symptoms of diarrhoea and vomiting should not return to work until 48 hours after all symptoms have stopped.

Those suffering with such symptoms are advised to stay at home, take over the counter remedies from a pharmacist, drink plenty of fluids and let the illness run its course. You should seek further advice if the symptoms last more than 60 hours, or if you have a pre-existing medical condition

Frequently asked questions

How does norovirus spread?

The virus is easily transmitted from one person to another. It can be transmitted by contact with an infected person; by consuming contaminated food or water or by contact with contaminated surfaces or objects. The infectious dose is very low, swallowing as few as 10 - 100 virus particles may be enough to cause illness.

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What are the symptoms?

The most common symptoms are nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. Symptoms often start with the sudden onset of nausea followed by projectile vomiting and watery diarrhoea. However, not all of those infected will experience all of the symptoms. Some people may also have a raised temperature, headaches and aching limbs.

Symptoms usually begin around 12 to 48 hours after becoming infected. The illness is self-limiting and the symptoms will last for 12 to 60 hours. Most people make a full recovery within one to two days, however some people (usually the very young or elderly) may become very dehydrated and require hospital treatment.

Why does norovirus often cause outbreaks?

Norovirus is easily spread from one person to another and is able to survive in the environment for many days. There are many different strains of norovirus, immunity is short-lived and infection with one strain does not protect against infection with another strain. Outbreaks commonly occur in semi-closed environments such as hospitals, nursing homes, schools and on cruise ships, where people are in close contact with one another for long periods.

How can these outbreaks be stopped?

Outbreaks can be difficult to control because norovirus is easily transmitted from one person to another, its low infectious dose and because the virus can survive in the environment for lengthy periods. The most effective way to respond to an outbreak is to institute good hygiene measures such as strict adherence to hand-washing especially when handling food, after contact with infected people, and after using the toilet; disinfecting contaminated areas promptly; not allowing infected people to prepare food until 48 hours after symptoms have elapsed and isolating ill people for up to 48 hours after their symptoms have ceased.

How is norovirus treated?

There is no specific treatment for norovirus apart from letting the illness run its course. It is important to drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration and to remain isolated to reduce the risk of spread.

If I'm suffering from norovirus, how can I prevent others from becoming infected?

Good hygiene is important in preventing others from becoming infected – this includes thorough hand washing after using the toilet. Food preparation should also be avoided until 48 hours after the symptoms have subsided.

Who is at risk of getting norovirus?

There is no one specific group who are at risk of contracting norovirus – it affects people of all ages. The very young and elderly should take extra care if infected, as dehydration is more common in these age groups.

Outbreaks of norovirus are reported frequently anywhere that large numbers of people congregate for periods of several days. This provides an ideal environment for the spread of the

disease. Healthcare settings tend to be particularly affected by outbreaks of norovirus. A recent study by the Health Protection Agency (HPA) shows that outbreaks are shortened when control measures at healthcare settings are implemented quickly, such as closing wards to new admissions within four days of the beginning of the outbreak and implementing strict hygiene measures.

How common is norovirus?

Norovirus is not a notifiable disease so reporting is voluntary. The HPA only receives reports of outbreaks and sees anywhere between 130 and 250 outbreaks each year. It is estimated that norovirus affects between 600,000 and 1m people in the UK each year.

Are there any long-term effects?

No, there are no long-term effects.

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Expiry date: until further notice