

Norovirus

What is it?

Norovirus, also known as 'winter vomiting disease' or 'stomach flu' is the most common cause of infectious diarrhoea in the UK.

Although not usually dangerous – the vast majority of sufferers recover after one or two days – the very young and the elderly are at risk of complications, such as dehydration, and may need hospital treatment.

Norovirus is known to cause large outbreaks of infection in hospitals, hotels, school, cruise ships and places of dense population.

How can you catch it?

Norovirus is highly infectious and spreads easily, usually through lack of good hygiene such as not washing hands after going to the toilet.

Symptoms of Norovirus

Symptoms typically begin between 24 and 48 hours after infection. Sudden onset of nausea is usually the first sign, followed by vomiting and watery diarrhoea. These will typically last 24 - 48 hours. Some people may also experience a mild fever, aching limbs and headaches. Symptoms typically disappear after a day or two.

How do people catch norovirus?

Through contact with an infected person, as well as contact with surfaces – such as door handles and tables – that are contaminated with the virus. It is also caught by consuming contaminated food or liquid. This means that outbreaks are particularly common within contained environments such as hospitals, schools, offices, cruise ships and hotels.

Once you have caught norovirus, you are immune to the illness for around 14 weeks. After this time it is possible to be reinfected with the virus and suffer the same symptoms.

What is the treatment?

There is no specific treatment for norovirus illness other than to let the illness run its course. Stay at home and drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration. That means regular sips of water or fruit juice, even if you are feeling sick. Adults can take rehydration drinks and anti-diarrhoea medicines available from pharmacies. (Anti diarrhoea medicines are not suitable for children).

The vast majority of those infected make a full recovery within two days. But particular care must be taken with the very young and older people who catch norovirus, as they are at higher risk of dehydration.

What employers can do to prevent an outbreak of norovirus in the workplace

Keeping the workplace entirely free of viruses and germs is very difficult but simple changes to personal hygiene habits or office layout may help keep your workforce healthy and bug free.

Follow these simple steps to help prevent an outbreak:

- Promote good hygiene standards. Encourage staff to regularly wash their hands and always make sure good quality hand sanitisers are available (preferably alcohol free ones as these will form a gentle but long lasting barrier across hands, inactivating germs for hours after use and protecting against a wide range of bacteria and viruses, including the norovirus).
- Ensure communal areas such as kitchens and washroom facilities are regularly cleaned. It is recommended that open plan offices with only basic workday cleaning in place have a professional deep clean at least twice a year to prevent the build up of hidden, embedded dirt and contamination, and the associated micro-organisms.
- Encourage staff to clean their desk areas regularly by providing anti bacterial wipes and sanitising hand gels.
- Ask staff who contract the virus to stay away from work for at least 48 hours after the symptoms have disappeared to avoid contaminating work colleagues.
- In the event of an outbreak, commission a deep clean of the workplace.

Tips for employees to limit their risk of catching it

It is not possible to guarantee that you will not catch norovirus. However, good hygiene will lower your risk of catching or spreading the virus.

Follow these guidelines to minimise your risk of infection:

1. Wash your hands often throughout the day, especially after using the toilet and before preparing or eating food. The recommended length of time you should wash your hands is 30 seconds.
2. Avoid using items such as tea towels or towels, which are normally present in communal areas and used by lots of people. These items can house high levels of bacteria and are often not cleaned regularly. Alternatively, encourage your employer to provide hand towel dispensers and lidded waste receptacles.
3. Clean your desk regularly. Ensure all surfaces are thoroughly cleaned if you eat at your desk and make sure that all food is removed and stored in the kitchen area when you have finished eating. If possible, avoid eating at your desk and use communal eating areas where provided. Avoiding raw, unwashed foods during a norovirus outbreak can also help lower your risk of infection.
4. Prevent the virus spreading by staying away from work if you suspect you have symptoms – which include headaches and vomiting – and do not return until 48 hours after the last symptoms have disappeared. If you go into work, you could pass on the virus to your colleagues.

For further information, email info@mohs.co.uk, visit mohs.co.uk or call 0121 601 4041