

Food Safety Fact Sheet

Foodborne Illness: Norovirus

What is norovirus?

Noroviruses are a group of viruses that cause the “stomach flu,” or gastroenteritis in people. The term norovirus was recently approved as the official name for this group of viruses. Viruses are very different from bacteria and parasites, some of which can cause illnesses similar to norovirus infection. Like all viral infections, noroviruses are not affected by treatment with antibiotics, and cannot grow outside of a person’s body.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and some stomach cramping. Some people have a low-grade fever, chills, headache, muscle aches and a general sense of tiredness. The illness often begins suddenly, and the infected person may feel very sick. Symptoms of norovirus illness usually begin about 24 to 48 hours after ingesting the virus, but they can appear as early as 12 hours after exposure. In most people, the illness is self-limiting with symptoms lasting for about 1 or 2 days. In general, children experience more vomiting than adults.

How is norovirus spread?

Noroviruses are found in the stool or vomit of infected people. People can become infected with the virus by:

- eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated with norovirus;
- touching surfaces or objects contaminated with norovirus, and then placing their hand in their mouth;
- having direct contact with another person who is infected and showing symptoms (for example, when caring for someone with illness, or sharing foods or eating utensils with someone who is ill).

Persons working in day-care centers or nursing homes should pay special attention to children or residents who have norovirus illness. This virus is very contagious and can spread rapidly in such environments.

How long are people contagious?

People infected with norovirus are contagious from the moment they begin feeling ill to at least 3 days after recovery. Some people may be contagious for as long as 2 weeks after recovery. Therefore, it is particularly important for people to use good hand washing and other hygienic practices after they have recently recovered from norovirus illness.

How do you treat norovirus?

Currently, there is no antiviral medication that works against norovirus and there is no vaccine to prevent infection. It cannot be treated with antibiotics. Norovirus illness is usually brief in healthy individuals. When people are ill with vomiting and diarrhea, they should drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration.

How can norovirus be prevented?

Follow these tips to protect yourself from norovirus:

- Frequently wash your hands, especially after toilet visits and changing diapers and before eating or preparing food.
- Carefully wash fruits and vegetables, and steam oysters before eating them.
- Thoroughly clean and disinfect contaminated surfaces immediately after an episode of illness by using a bleach-based household cleaner.
- Immediately remove and wash clothing or linens that may be contaminated with virus after an episode of illness (use hot water and soap).
- Flush or discard any vomit and/or stool in the toilet and make sure that the surrounding area is kept clean.
- Persons who are infected with norovirus should not prepare food while they have symptoms and for 3 days after they recover from their illness. Food that may have been contaminated by an ill person should be disposed of properly.