

Norovirus Patient information leaflet

What is Norovirus?

Norovirus is a virus sometimes called the 'winter vomiting bug' that spreads very easily and very quickly from one person to another. Even though it is called the winter vomiting bug, you can catch it at any time of year. It is the most common cause of infectious diarrhoea in Ireland and in most other countries. It can spread very easily and quickly in any place where people are living close together – for example, in hotels, on cruise ships, in nursing homes and hospitals.

What are the symptoms of a Norovirus infection?

The illness is often called 'vomiting disease' because people can get sick very suddenly and have severe vomiting. Most people will get sick usually within a day or two of coming into contact with the virus. The virus does not affect everyone the same way. Some people get diarrhoea, others get both diarrhoea and vomiting. Some people may just feel a bit off form and lose their appetite; others feel like they are going to throw up but never really vomit. Other symptoms are stomach pain and cramps, aches and pains and low energy. The illness can make you feel very miserable, but usually, you'll start to feel better in a day or two. Some people who get norovirus infection do not become ill at all.

This illness is very common in the community, and most people do not need to see a doctor. They should stay home, take lots of fluids and they will usually feel better in a day or two. Very few people need hospital treatment, but the infection can be very serious for a small number of people who were already very sick before they caught the norovirus infection. Visit www.undertheweather.ie to get advice on managing tummy bugs at home.

What is the treatment for Norovirus?

Norovirus infection usually goes away on its own in a couple of days. Sipping plenty of clear fluids such as water, flat lemonade and rehydration drinks can help replace fluids lost by diarrhoea and vomiting. Because the infection is a virus, antibiotics do not work on Norovirus. Sometimes, antibiotics may cause side effects including diarrhoea. This means that you are better off without antibiotics unless you need them for some other infection.

How can I reduce the spread of Norovirus?

Norovirus spreads very easily. There are billions of virus germs in vomit and diarrhoea. The virus gets onto hands, table tops, food and drink, and so on. Norovirus can even spread in the air. People with norovirus infection can still spread the virus for at least two days after they feel completely better.

If you have a norovirus infection at home, please stay there. Apart from anyone living in your home, ask people to stay away from the house while you are sick (unless there is someone you need to help you).

Do not visit people in hospital or a nursing home and do not prepare food for people if you have diarrhoea or vomiting because you might spread Norovirus. If, for any reason, you have to go to an emergency department in a hospital, be sure to tell the staff at reception that you have vomiting and diarrhoea.

Clean your hands thoroughly with soap and water, especially after using the toilet. Use a separate towel during the illness. Try not to prepare food and drink for anyone else until you have been well again for two days. If you are vomiting and have diarrhoea, stay close to the toilet or keep a bowl or basin handy so that you can keep most of the virus germs in the toilet or bowl. Try to keep the toilet rim, flush handle and seat clean. Always close the lid of the toilet when flushing to reduce the spread of the virus. If you vomit on the floor or furniture at home, use hot water and detergent to clean up and clean your hands thoroughly afterwards.

You should stay away from work, and generally avoid mixing with other people until you have been well for 48 hours. This is particularly important for people who work in healthcare, childcare or food preparation. Do not visit a hospital or nursing home until you have been stopped vomiting and diarrhoea for 48 hours as you might cause a Norovirus outbreak. If your child has had vomiting or diarrhoea, they should not go to school or crèche until they have stopped vomiting and diarrhoea for 48 hours.

How long will I carry Norovirus for?

You could carry norovirus for weeks or months after you get better, but the biggest risk of spread is while you are sick and for the first two days after you feel better. After you have been well for two days, you can go back to normal. For all people at all times, cleaning hands thoroughly after going to the toilet is an important step to prevent the spread of all bacteria and viruses.

Do I need to go to the doctor with Norovirus?

You should get medical attention if you develop diarrhoea that doesn't go away within several days. Also, call your doctor if you experience very severe vomiting, blood in your stools (poo), stomach pain or dehydration. Telephone your GP to tell them you have Norovirus, and they will try to reduce the possibility of bringing Norovirus into the surgery.