

Information about viral gastroenteritis e.g. Norovirus for Patients, Relatives and Carers

What is Norovirus?

Norovirus and other viral stomach bugs affect people of all ages. Norovirus is the most common stomach bug in the UK, it may also be known as gastroenteritis and winter vomiting virus. Noroviruses are a group of viruses which cause symptoms such as nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. It is highly contagious and easily spread from person to person. The spread of infection is easiest in places where people are in close proximity, such as residential homes, schools, hospitals and workplaces.

How does it spread?

The virus is easily transmitted from one person to another and spreads by infected faeces and vomit. Transmission is usually by contact with an infected person, or by eating food or drinking liquids that are contaminated with Norovirus, or by contact with contaminated surfaces or objects. Even after the symptoms have stopped people may still carry the virus and so need to continue to wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water.

How is Norovirus treated?

The symptoms often come on suddenly and may include nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea. The symptoms usually last around 2 days and infection with Norovirus is self-limiting. Most people will make a full recovery within 2-3 days. There is no specific treatment required but it is important to keep hydrated by drinking plenty of fluids, especially children and the elderly.

Why does Norovirus often cause outbreaks?

Norovirus often causes outbreaks because it is so easily spread from one person to another. The virus is able to survive in the environment and on surfaces for many days. Because there are many different strains of Norovirus and immunity is short-lived, outbreaks tend to affect more than 50% of susceptible people.

How can these outbreaks be stopped?

As Norovirus is so easily transmitted, outbreaks can be long lasting and difficult to control. The most effective way to respond to an outbreak in hospital is to isolate affected patients, clean and disinfect contaminated areas and equipment and to institute good handwashing. Although alcohol gel is effective against numerous bacteria, it may not eliminate all types of viruses, such as Norovirus. Therefore, as a standard practice, we kindly request all visitors to wash their hands using warm water and soap, followed by thorough drying when entering and leaving our wards. We would be grateful if you could ensure that this guidance is followed.

Visiting advice during a Norovirus outbreak, please:-

- Do not visit the hospital if you have recently had Norovirus or been in close contact with someone who had it over the past 3 days.
- Only visit the hospital if it is absolutely necessary, preferably family members only.
- Only visit one ward at visiting time.
- Do not routinely bring children under 12 years old into visit.
- Hands must be washed with warm water and soap and thoroughly dried when visiting wards.
- Put on gloves and aprons if visiting a room where there is Norovirus.

Thank you.

NNUH Infection, Prevention and Control Team

