



FACT SHEET

Disease Prevention

for Parents and Childcare Providers

Norovirus (Stomach Flu)

What are Noroviruses?

Noroviruses are a group of viruses that cause the “stomach flu,” also called gastroenteritis (GAS-tro-en-ter-i-tis). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that norovirus is the cause of 23 million cases of gastroenteritis each year.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of norovirus illness usually include *nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and some stomach cramping*. Sometimes people also have a low-grade fever, chills, headache, muscle aches, and tiredness. The illness often begins suddenly, and the person may be very sick. Symptoms usually last 1 or 2 days. In general, children experience more vomiting than do adults. Most people with norovirus illness experience both diarrhea and vomiting.

When do symptoms begin?

Symptoms of norovirus illness usually begin about 24 to 48 hours after exposure to the virus, but they can appear as early as 12 hours.

How do people become infected?

Norovirus is found in the stool or vomit of an infected person. Other people become infected with the virus when they eat it, or in some way get it in their mouth. This route of transmission is known as the fecal-oral route and can happen by:

- eating or drinking something that is contaminated with norovirus;
- touching surfaces or objects contaminated with norovirus, then eating or touching the mouth;
- having direct contact with a sick person (the virus can be released into the air from vomiting or diarrhea; it then spreads to surfaces or directly into someone else’s mouth).

Surfaces can harbor the virus for weeks given certain conditions. Once in the environment, movements of people and materials can spread it easily.

What can be done to prevent the spread of this disease?

The single most important thing that people can do to prevent the spread of norovirus in the community is to stay home if they are sick. This virus is extremely contagious and spreads from person to person. When sick people go to school, work, or daycare, the virus keeps getting passed to other people. People can be reinfected and become ill with norovirus again several months later, so it’s in everyone’s best interest to break the cycle of disease.

You and your family can decrease the chance of contracting norovirus by following these preventive steps:

- Wash hands thoroughly and frequently, especially after using the toilet, 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 (vomiting, diarrhea) by using a solution of 1 part bleach per 50 parts water. Chlorine is known to be effective against noroviruses.
- Immediately remove and wash clothing or linens that may be contaminated with the 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 cleaned and disinfected.
- **People 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 thrown away.

Children in daycare or other group settings

Children in daycare or other group settings are of special concern. **This virus is very contagious and can spread rapidly** throughout such environments. As required by Montana law, children who have symptoms should be excluded from daycare settings and for at least 24 hours after symptoms have stopped; longer (48-72 hours) if at all possible. Each child's and the caregiver's hands must be washed carefully after toilet use or diaper changing so that the virus is not spread.

How long are people contagious?

People who have norovirus are contagious from when they begin feeling ill to at least 3 days after recovery. Some people may be contagious for as long as 2 weeks after recovery. There is no evidence to suggest that an infected person can become a long-term carrier of norovirus.

Who gets norovirus infection?

Anyone can become infected with these viruses. There are many different strains of norovirus, making it difficult for a person's body to develop long-lasting immunity. As a result, norovirus illness can recur throughout a person's lifetime. As with most illnesses, children may be more susceptible than other age groups.

How serious is it?

Norovirus disease is usually not life threatening; most people get better within 1 or 2 days and have no long-term health effects. However, people may feel very sick, become dehydrated due to vomiting and diarrhea, and may need medical attention. Dehydration problems are usually only seen among the very young, the elderly, and persons with weakened immune systems.

If I was ill with norovirus, how soon can I return to work/school/daycare?

A person should not go to work, school, daycare, or any public place if they are ill with diarrhea or vomiting. People may return to work/school/daycare after having been free of symptoms for 24 hours, but it is better to wait 48-72 hours if possible. Food handlers should wait to return to work for 72 hours or 3 days of being symptom-free.

If you have any questions, please call the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department at (406) 447-8352.