

Viral Gastroenteritis Fact Sheet

Viral gastroenteritis is an infection of the intestines commonly caused by Norovirus, formerly called “Norwalk-like viruses”

Viral gastroenteritis is often called the “flu” or the “stomach flu,” and should not be confused with the influenza virus that is transmitted through the air and causes different symptoms like a cough and fever.

Viral gastroenteritis occurs in people of all ages

Viral gastroenteritis is a common infection. It is often seen in the winter among children in schools and child care settings, and among residents and employees of nursing homes.

People get viral gastroenteritis from other people

Norovirus is present in the stool or vomit of infected persons. The virus is usually spread to other people either by contact with an infected person's stool or vomit or by eating or drinking contaminated food or water. The virus can also be spread by being near someone who is infected with Norovirus while they are vomiting. The virus is easily spread in settings such as households, health care settings, schools and child care centers, and during food preparation if hands have not been thoroughly washed with soap and water.

Norovirus causes symptoms such as:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Stomach pain
- Low fever
- Headache, muscle aches, chills
- Tiredness

Symptoms usually begin suddenly in 12 to 48 hours after exposure. Symptoms usually last 24 to 48 hours and go away without treatment.

Hand washing is the most important way to prevent infection. Wash hands with soap and water:

- After using the toilet
- After having diarrhea or vomiting
- After changing diapers
- After touching any stool-soiled or vomit-soiled materials, toilets, or surfaces
- Before handling food or drink
- After cleaning up vomit or diarrhea from someone who is ill with Norovirus gastroenteritis
- Before eating

Thoroughly clean and disinfect contaminated surfaces immediately after an episode of illness by using a bleach-based household cleaner.

Help young children to wash their hands.

See your doctor if you have severe gastroenteritis

- If vomiting and/or diarrhea are severe, you may need to receive fluids in the hospital.
- Food handlers, health care/child care workers, and children in child care who have viral gastroenteritis should not work or attend child care until at least 48 hours after their symptoms have cleared. In some cases, the health department may require longer exclusions.
- Antibiotics do not treat viral gastroenteritis and will not help your symptoms.