

Information on norovirus infections for the general public

What are noroviruses?

Noroviruses have been identified in recent years as the most common causative agents of viral gastrointestinal infections. They are highly infectious and spread easily between people. Viruses are shed in the faeces of infected people and are transmitted through hands, food, water, contaminated surfaces and droplets from vomit, as well as through direct human-to-human contact. A very small number of virus particles are required for infection. Immune protection is not permanent and recurrent infections are possible.

The incubation period, i.e. the time from infection to the first signs of illness, is usually 24 to 48 hours. The onset of the disease can be sudden or develop gradually. Most sufferers report nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and abdominal cramps, while some also have fever, headache and muscle aches. This disease is known in layman's terms as 'stomach flu'. In otherwise healthy people, the problem usually disappears within 1 to 3 days. Infection can be severe in young children, the elderly and hospitalised people. 10% of those who fall ill need medical attention, some even hospitalisation. Deaths have been reported mainly in the elderly in outbreaks in various care settings. Treatment is symptomatic.

Due to close contacts, the disease spreads rapidly in institutions such as hospitals and nursing homes and can affect many people.

What I can do to prevent the spread of norovirus?

Personal hygiene is important. The most important measure is to wash hands with warm water and soap, especially after using the toilet. We also need to take care of hygiene and cleaning of toilet facilities and surfaces touched by hands. Effective ventilation of the premises is also essential, as is the proper disposal and storage of contaminated nappies in sealed bags.

It is important to be aware that a sick person can contaminate the food they prepare or serve, and a large number of people can be further infected through this food. The greatest risk is posed by uncooked food (fresh vegetables or fruit).

Bed linen, towels and other laundry can be washed with normal detergent, and dishes can be washed by hand or by machine with normal detergent.

To limit further spread of the disease, the patient should stay at home (not receiving visitors or visiting, temporarily excluded from the group - kindergarten, school, workplace, etc.). They can return to the group 48 hours after the cessation of the problem (last vomiting or diarrhoea).

How do we care for a patient with norovirus infection at home?

The patient should rest and drink enough fluids. No special treatment is usually needed. If the indigestion is very pronounced and does not go away within a few days, medical advice should be sought.

What about visits to hospitals and nursing homes during outbreaks of norovirus infections?

We recommend limiting visits. Relatives and friends who feel unwell, have recently vomited or had diarrhoea should not visit. Children should not be allowed to visit. Visitors should thoroughly disinfect their hands before and after visiting and should not visit different people around the facility to avoid transmitting infection. They should follow the facility's instructions.