

Prevention of norovirus infections in food handling

NOROVIRUS INFECTIONS

Noroviruses have been recognised in recent years as the **most common causative agents of viral gastrointestinal infections** and are also an **important cause of food-borne infections**.

They are highly contagious and spread easily between people. They are excreted in the faeces of infected people and can be **transmitted**:

- **Directly**
 - Through **hands** contaminated with the faeces of an infected person, or through contact with infectious droplets when vomiting.
- **Indirectly**
 - Through **food and water**
 - Through contaminated **surfaces, objects and utensils** (the virus can survive in the environment for several days).

Protection after infection is not permanent, so infections can recur.

The time from infection to the first signs of illness is usually 24 to 48 hours. Most patients report nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and abdominal cramps, while some also have fever, headache and muscle aches.

An infected person sheds most of the virus in the first few days of illness, but the virus can be found in the person's stool for several weeks after the problem has stopped.



NOROVIRUS-INFECTED STAFF PREPARING OR SERVING THE FOOD ARE OFTEN RESPONSIBLE FOR CONTAMINATING THE FOOD, AND THE CONTAMINATION CAN BE PASSED ON TO A LARGE NUMBER OF PEOPLE THROUGH THE FOOD.

Most commonly, the virus is transmitted on food:

- **by contaminated hands due to poor hand hygiene;**

- **through surfaces contaminated with human faeces or infectious droplets produced by vomit from an infected person;**
- **through contaminated water.**

Food can be contaminated with noroviruses during production, storage and sale, but less frequently.

The greatest risk of norovirus infection is posed by food that does not need to be cooked before consumption.

The most common infections are from raw or poorly cooked shellfish, meat, sandwiches, ice cubes, fresh and frozen fruit (strawberries, raspberries) and vegetables. Noroviruses are present in frozen products for longer periods of time.

Contaminated food usually has no change in appearance, smell or taste.

Taking care of personal hygiene is important.



THE MOST IMPORTANT MEASURE IS TO WASH YOUR HANDS THOROUGHLY WITH WARM WATER AND SOAP. HANDS SHOULD BE WASHED BEFORE STARTING WORK, OFTEN WHILE WORKING AND IMMEDIATELY AFTER USING THE TOILET.

We also need to take care of hygiene and cleaning of **toilet facilities and surfaces** that we touch with our hands.

People with acute infection (diarrhoea, vomiting) who work in the food industry should immediately inform their employer of their illness. They should not work during the acute infection and for two to three days after the diarrhoea or vomiting has stopped, or as instructed by a doctor.

After returning to work, they should spend some time doing jobs that do not involve handling food, such as cashiering, etc.

Fruit and vegetables should always be washed thoroughly with clean water before use.

Shellfish should be sourced from reliable sources with proper transport and documentation, and should be sufficiently heat-treated during preparation



WHAT TO DO IN THE EVENT OF CONTAMINATION OF FOOD DURING PREPARATION OR SERVICE

Food preparation and serving must be stopped immediately.

A contaminated surface due to vomiting or diarrhoea should be cleaned and disinfected.

Only the persons cleaning up the contaminated area are allowed to move around until the cleaning is finished. Gloves must be worn when cleaning. First, blot the liquid part of the contamination with a paper towel or cleaning cloth, which is disposed of immediately after use in a special bag. The residual dirt is then cleaned with detergent and hot water and the surface is disinfected. The disinfectant must be used in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. Dispose of used gloves in the same bag.

After cleaning, wash your hands thoroughly and ventilate the room.

All exposed food, food that may be contaminated and food handled by an infected person must be discarded.

Wash dishes by hand or by machine with normal detergent, handle contaminated kitchen cloths and tablecloths with care (do not shake them to avoid spreading the virus) and machine wash them as usual.

All such incidents must be documented (date, time, location, persons involved, action taken) and reported to supervisors.