

# Viral Gastroenteritis (Norovirus)

## Information for patients

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### What is a Gastroenteritis infection?

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Gastroenteritis is an illness that causes diarrhoea and sickness. It can be caused by several different types of viruses. Norovirus (also known as the 'Winter Vomiting Disease' or Norwalk-like virus) is the most common that results in vomiting and/or diarrhoea.

Norovirus is most common in the winter, although it can occur at other times of the year.

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### What are the symptoms?

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The symptoms often begin with feeling sick and abdominal pain, followed by diarrhoea and/or vomiting. Other symptoms may include headaches, slightly raised temperature and loss of appetite. The symptoms usually last for 12 to 60 hours.

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### How is it transmitted and how could I have caught it?

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Only a very small number of germs are needed to make you ill. Germs can spread from person to person via contaminated surfaces, food or water from infected droplets dispersed into the air by vomiting.

The main way people get infected is by getting germs on their hands, which are then transferred either directly to their mouths or onto foods. Food that has been prepared by someone suffering from the illness can become contaminated and eating this food may also lead to infection. Eating uncooked shellfish can also be a source of infection if the shellfish have fed in contaminated water.

The virus is very easy to catch and can spread quickly from person to person. Outbreaks can occur in places where lots of people are in close contact with each other, such as nursing homes, hospitals, schools, cruise ships and hotels.

**Both patients and staff can be affected.**

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### How long does it take for the infection to develop?

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In general, the symptoms begin 24-48 hours following infection.

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## How can we prevent the spread of infection?

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Good standards of personal hygiene can minimise the risk of spreading the infection. These include:

- Always wash your hands after using the toilet. Use soap, hot water and clean paper towels or kitchen roll for hand drying.
- Hands must be washed before eating and drinking: remind your family to do likewise.
- Do not handle or prepare food for other people until you have been symptom-free for 48 hours. Ask someone else to prepare meals whenever possible.
- Do not leave soiled clothing or bed linen lying around. Place it in a plastic bag until it's washed. Linen must be washed on a hot cycle in the washing machine. Handwashing of linen should be avoided. Further advice is provided in the leaflet Advice for carers on laundering patients' soiled clothing.
- Take care when changing nappies, or cleaning up after someone who has been sick, or had diarrhoea. If cleaning up vomit or diarrhoea, the surface should be washed with a bleach based product and hot water. Paper towels or disposable cloths should be used for cleaning and then discarded immediately. If items are cleaned with reusable cloths, they should be kept separate then laundered on a hot wash in the washing machine.
- If possible, the person should use the toilet as usual. If a commode or bedpan is used, it should be carefully emptied in the toilet bowl after use, washed with chlorine or a diluted bleach solution and rinsed and dried.
- Hands should be washed after attending to the person.

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## Alcohol hand rub?

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Alcohol hand gels are not as good as hand washing with liquid soap and water at killing the viruses.

**Always wash hands with soap and water.**

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## What precautions should visitors?

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What precautions should visitors take?

- If you think you've had Norovirus or you have experienced sickness or diarrhoea, please do not visit a hospital or nursing home until you have had no symptoms for at least two days.
- Washing hands with soap and water is very important to prevent the spread of infection.
- Please wash your hands with soap and water when you arrive and before you leave the ward.
- Whenever possible do not help other patients: please ask a nurse to help.
- Please try and avoid bringing children or babies to visit.

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## What precautions should patients take while they are in hospital?

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- If you develop diarrhoea or sickness let the nurses know straight away. You may be moved to a side room; however, if there is an outbreak on a ward it may be difficult to place all affected patients into side rooms.
- If this happens you may be cared for on the ward together with other affected patients.
- It is very important to keep your hands clean. You should wash your hands before you eat any thing and after you go to the toilet.
- The staff will take precautions not to spread the virus around by wearing gloves, aprons and washing their hands.
- If you have food with you, keep it covered in a sealed container inside your locker.

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## What should I do if I am unwell after I go home?

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If you develop diarrhoea or sickness after you go home, it is important you drink small but frequent drinks to make sure you do not get dehydrated. This will help you avoid being readmitted to hospital unnecessarily. If your symptoms do not settle or you are feeling particularly unwell you may need to contact NHS 111 or your GP for further advice.

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## How soon can the person return to work or school?

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Affected people should stay away from work, school or nursery until 48 hours after the symptoms have stopped.

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## How do I find out more information?

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If you have any concerns, you may contact the nursing staff on your ward or department or the district nurse who visits you.

Other people that can answer your questions include members of the Infection Prevention and Control Team. Telephone 0118 9605 140 or 01753 635 698. You can also get advice from your GP.

A useful website for general information about Norovirus is [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

Alternatively, you can contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) who can listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and direct you to further information. They can be contacted on 0118 9605 027 or [bht@berkshire.nhs.uk](mailto:bht@berkshire.nhs.uk).

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