

# VIRAL GASTROENTERITIS

(Norovirus or Winter flu bug)

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Your Questions Answered

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EAST CAMBRIDGESHIRE  
DISTRICT COUNCIL

## What is Viral Gastroenteritis?

It is caused by a group of related small viruses. The most common of these is known as norovirus (winter flu bug). Humans are the only known source of infection.

## How do I know I have Viral Gastroenteritis (Norovirus)?

Diagnosis is normally confirmed by testing a sample of your faeces (stools). This is usually at the request of your doctor.

## How is it spread?

Only a very small number of viruses are needed to make you ill. When a person is suffering from norovirus they shed the virus in their vomit and faeces. The vomit from someone with norovirus is highly infectious.

Severe risk of spread occurs when minute droplets (aerosols) get into the air from vomit or diarrhoea. The infection can then be passed easily from person to person via contaminated surfaces, food or water and from infected droplets in the air we breathe. An infected person may also spread the infection when coughing and sneezing.

Large outbreaks often occur at functions or in residential and nursing homes where many people may be together in a building.

## What are the symptoms?

The illness is sudden and can be severe. Diarrhoea and vomiting are the most common symptoms. Sometimes headaches, giddiness, fever, nausea and abdominal pain also occur. Duration of the illness is normally short. Most people make a rapid recovery.

## How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Normally within 24-48 hours of being exposed to the virus. In an outbreak the initial case is typically followed by others becoming ill one or two days later. These then put more people at risk and numbers can climb rapidly after a few days. This helps to distinguish it from food poisoning where illness tends to be concentrated in the first couple of days.

## Do infected people need to stay away from work or school?

All cases of gastroenteritis are regarded as potentially infectious. All infected people should stay away from work or school until free from diarrhoea and vomiting (without medication) for at least 48 hours. Inform your employer, child carer or school as soon as possible to help them identify if they may have an outbreak.

If you belong to one of the following 'high risk' groups, additional precautions are needed & you have a duty to report your illness to your employer, child carer or school.

- food handlers involved with unwrapped or ready to eat food,
- staff of health care facilities in contact with food or patients,

- children aged below 5 years attending nurseries, playgroups, etc
- older children and adults who may find it difficult to carry out good personal hygiene

Infected people in these groups must not return to work, school or nursery until their symptoms have ceased and their bowel habits have been normal for at least 48 hours (without medication). This is provided that they wash their hands thoroughly after using the toilet.

It is very important to get in touch with us if you, or anyone else in your household, are in one of these 'high risk' groups. This is to enable us to give any necessary advice to halt the potential spread of the illness.

## Visitors

It is strongly recommended you do not have any visitors (this includes friends, family and your children's friends) into your home until everyone within your home has fully recovered and the appropriate testing has confirmed the infection has totally cleared. This is particularly important for children under the age of 5 or older children/adults who are unable to carry out good personal hygiene.

## How can I prevent it spreading?

When cleaning up vomit or diarrhoea, protect yourself by wearing disposable rubber gloves and if available wear a plastic disposable apron.

Keep the area of contamination as small as possible. Cover any vomit (or diarrhoea) on surfaces with paper towels or tissues. This helps to soak up excess liquid and to prevent contamination spreading over a wider area.

Once as much liquid as possible has been absorbed, carefully remove the material for safe disposal. A plastic dustpan is a useful scoop. The material should be then flushed down the toilet.

When as much of the material as possible has been removed, thoroughly wash the area and any equipment used with detergent and hot water (and then sanitise using a suitable disinfectant or bleach where possible).

Wash down food contact surfaces with detergent and hot water and then sanitise using a suitable disinfectant or bleach.

Thoroughly clean soiled carpets and soft furnishings with hot water and detergent or a proprietary carpet shampoo. Use a steam cleaner if you have one.

Hand washing is an important factor in preventing the spread of infection. Thoroughly wash your hands with soap under warm running water:

- AFTER using or cleaning the toilet
- AFTER touching anything contaminated by diarrhoea or vomiting
- AFTER attending to anybody who is unwell
- AFTER handling dirty laundry, clothing or bedding

- AFTER handling used nappies
- BEFORE handling, preparing, serving, or consuming food or drink
- AFTER touching animals during visits at farms, wildlife parks, zoos, pet corners, etc

People who are ill should ideally use anti-bacterial liquid soap and separate towels or disposable paper tissues. A nailbrush can assist you to clean under your fingernails. Always dry your hands properly as this helps to remove bacteria. Young children should be assisted to ensure they wash their hands properly.

## Cleaning the toilet

For as long as people are unwell:

- Disinfect the toilet seat after each use, using a separate cloth
- Wash and disinfect other items like bedpans or potties after each use
- Disinfect the door handle, wash hand basin taps and flush handle after use
- Clean the toilet bowl using a toilet brush and disinfectant. Rinse the brush by flushing the toilet, and replace in its holder
- Keep any rubber gloves used for cleaning the toilet for this use only
- Flush the toilet with the seat and lid down

## Laundry

- Dirty laundry from persons with food poisoning should be kept separate from other laundry
- Carefully remove any soiled bed linen or clothing and put into a plastic bag
- If possible remove any heavy soiling into the toilet before washing
- Wash soiled clothing and bedding separately on as hot a washing programme as possible without exceeding fabric care instructions

## Food Safety Points to Remember

- Keep foods covered. Do not eat any food that may have been contaminated by the virus. Dispose of it in a sealed refuse bag
- ALWAYS keep raw meat separate from other foods
- ALWAYS cook foods thoroughly. This includes meat which is thoroughly cooked when the juices run clear
- Thoroughly wash fresh fruit and salads before serving
- AVOID eating or drinking untreated milk or dairy products, or drinking untreated water

**REMEMBER TO WASH YOUR HANDS FREQUENTLY  
ASSIST YOUNG CHILDREN TO WASH THEIR HANDS PROPERLY  
MAKE SURE EVERYBODY FOLLOWS THESE PRECAUTIONS**

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