



NOROVIRUS (STOMACH FLU)

What is Norovirus (stomach flu)?

Norovirus (stomach flu) infection is caused by a group of viruses called *Noroviruses*. These viruses are found worldwide thus in New Brunswick. They commonly cause outbreaks in schools, daycares and residential facilities. These viruses cause diarrhea illness, (also known as the stomach flu), and are passed in feces or vomit. This flu is not the same as the "flu" or influenza, a respiratory illness caused by the influenza virus.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually appear suddenly, about 24 to 48 hours after a person becomes infected with the virus. Most persons who become ill have nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and stomach cramps. They may also have a low-grade fever, chills, headache, muscle aches and fatigue. Symptoms usually last eight to twelve hours, and people normally recover in 48 hours.

How is Norovirus spread?

Noroviruses are passed in feces and vomit from infected people and spread very easily. The virus is spread by person to person contact.

Some examples of how the virus can be spread:

- Inadequate washing of hands of an infected person prior to food preparation;
- Sharing food or eating utensils with an ill person;
- Touching surfaces or objects contaminated with norovirus (like door handles).

How is Norovirus infection diagnosed?

Diagnosis is based on an assessment of clinical symptoms by a health care provider and laboratory testing of a stool sample.

Who is at risk of Norovirus infection?

Anyone exposed to the virus can become infected. Young children, the elderly and persons with weakened immune systems are at a greater risk of developing more serious illness. Outbreaks increase in the fall and winter months and are common within families and group settings where people are in close contact with one another, for example nursing homes, hospitals, childcare centers, schools and residential living facilities.

How can Norovirus infection be prevented?

Use good environmental management. Flush or discard any stool in the toilet and clean surrounding area using hot water and detergent. A chlorine-based disinfectant is recommended.

Practice good personal hygiene. Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after using the toilet or changing a diaper, after handling animals or contact with animal feces, after handling raw poultry and meats and before preparing or eating food.

Take food safety precautions. Wash and/or peel all raw vegetables and fruits before eating. Thoroughly cook all meats (meat, poultry and seafood). Prevent contact of cooked foods with raw poultry and other meat. Drink and eat only pasteurized dairy products (milk, cheese, yogurt and ice cream).

Drink properly treated water. Avoid swallowing recreational waters from swimming pools and hot tubs. Do not drink untreated surface water from lakes or streams. Test private well drinking water regularly (once or twice per year).

How is Norovirus infection treated?

Persons with diarrhea should drink a lot of liquids to avoid dehydration, stay home when ill; and practice good personal hygiene like hand washing. Avoid preparing food for others while you have symptoms and for 48 hours after you recover. Consult your family doctor for advice and treatment if you have bloody or severe diarrhea, prescription medicines can be used.

What is the Public Health response?

Health care providers and laboratories are required to confidentially notify cases to Public Health. Public Health staff may investigate to find out how the infection occurred, identify other people who may be at risk of infection, implement control measures, and provide advice as necessary; including exclusion of infected workers in high risk occupations like persons involved in food handling, direct patient care, and care of the young (daycare) or the elderly (institutional settings).

Further Information

For additional information, contact your family physician, local Public Health office, or Telecare 811.

Useful websites:

Public Health Agency of Canada
<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/>

Health Canada
<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca>